

Conflicts of Interest

For those of you that have been in my ethics class, you may remember that I teach two rules. You have heard me say that if you follow these two rules, you will likely never have an ethics violation. My first rule is:

Do what's in the best interest of DeKalb County regardless of your own personal or financial interest.

So what am I really talking about? I am talking about conflicting or competing interests and how to deal with those interests. We all have families and friends, many of us have jobs outside the County and we may be involved in our churches and volunteer groups. Most of these activities rarely conflict with our position in the County, but there are times that they may interfere with performing our responsibilities for the County in an unbiased way.

So often conflicts occur out of innocent intentions to help someone out and not necessarily greed or self-interest. A conflict can arise out of our desire to give additional business to a contractor we like, especially when we have developed a relationship over time with that contractor. The same might be true for a friend or family member who is seeking business or some official action from the County. We may want to use our influence within the County to help that person and, *what is the harm?*

Our personal relationships can sway our judgment and cause us to make decisions in favor of a friend or individual who may be capable, but is not the best choice for the County. "Doing what is in the best interest for the County and not your own personal interest" involves asking yourself the question, "Am I persuaded to make the best possible decision for my employer, the County, or am I swayed by the outcome or benefits for others or myself? Does this "kindness of a favor" conflict with my ability to carry out my responsibilities to the County in an unbiased way?"

Now, I always mention two rules in my class. The second is this:

Avoid the appearance of impropriety.

Some of you may remember from my class that I often use the example of hiring my brother-in-law to a position in the County. The conflict is obvious, I have a personal relationship with my brother-in-law and my sister, both of whom would benefit financially from the job.

But, what if based on his application my brother-in-law is actually the best person for the posted job. You might think, *well, in that case there is no conflict*. However, you still have a perception problem. Regardless of how good my brother-in-law's qualifications might be, his hiring will be perceived as a conflict by everyone else. Actual or perceived conflicts of interest have the potential to undermine our credibility and the trust of others if we don't manage the situation correctly.

How do we manage the conflict?

Disclose and Recuse

Having a conflict of interest does not indicate you have done something wrong. It is dealing correctly with the conflict that avoids the ethics problem.

To successfully manage a conflict of interest, you must disclose the relationship that causes the conflict. Once you have disclosed the conflict and take yourself out of any decision making involving the conflict, you will also eliminate the perception that there is a conflict and with it, the perception that there is any wrongdoing. Why? ***Because you are being transparent and honest.***

Anytime we hold a position and are in a situation where we can influence an outcome that may benefit either ourselves or someone else, rather than the County, the Ethics Code calls on you to disclose it – regardless of whether money is involved. Disclosure provides an opportunity for the Ethics Office or your supervisor to assess whether there is a conflict. This is exactly the reason why the Personnel Code requires all employees to disclose employment outside the County.

Don't get hung up on deciding if it's a conflict or not—just disclose it, because that's the right thing to do for everyone involved. Having a conflict of interest isn't wrong or bad, but not disclosing the situation may create an ethics violation or the perception of one.

For information on how to disclose a conflict please call the Ethics Office or fill out this form: As always, I welcome your comments.

<http://www.dekalbcountyethics.org/filings-conflict-of-interest/>

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