

# DEFINITIONS for ANTI-CORRUPTION WORK

*In studying ethics, many terms come up that are somewhat clumped together which can cause misunderstandings. If we are to be successful in creating institutions with more integrity, we have to have a common language. There are books written on each of these topics, but for our purposes now, it might be helpful to have a short, working definition of some of the key concepts you will observe and work with as a public service employee.*

1. **Ethics:** the study of morals, what is right and wrong; how to act in personal relations. Here are some basic ethics traits: wisdom, courage, truthfulness, respect, fairness, loyalty. If you are treated unfairly at work, or someone tells you a half-truth, it is stressful; we know it's not right, but what can we do about it? Successful organizations handle internal ethics problems quickly; groups with poor leadership have constant issues with staff and ethics.

## **EXERCISE.**

Write down a time when you witnessed an ethics problem in your department. What happened? Then, write down 3 examples of observing someone acting "ethically" at work. (If in a group, discuss these examples.)

2. **Government Ethics:** these are the ground rules on how to act to avoid conflicts of interest and abuse of power in your role as a government employee or official.

Example of Issues in Government Ethics:

- many people are in need of help in a flood zone--the Mayor's aide sends the City work crews to the homes of important government officials first;
- after a contract is awarded to a company, an employee involved in the process quits and goes to work for the company;
- after voting in favor of a football team's request for funding, two City Council members leave the meeting early to have dinner with the football team's lobbyist and executives;
- elected officials receiving free trips and tickets from lobbyists;
- a city employee working part time for a company bidding for a contract from the City;
- the city manager hiring a family member to be her assistant;

## **EXERCISE.**

Write down 3 examples of a local government ethics issue you have observed. (If you can't think of any real ones, then list 3 potential ones that could happen.)

3. **Corruption:** the abuse of public office for private gain. Corrupt acts, depending on where you live and what laws apply, can be legal or illegal. If citizens see a government employee or

official doing something through their office to get themselves special benefits, they will (along with the newspaper) consider that "corrupt", even though technically, it may not violate any existing law.

### **Examples of Corruption:**

- an official taking a \$500 bribe to vote a certain way (the classic example of illegal corruption);
- a Department Head having a retirement party for himself; his staff collects \$20,000 from vendors doing business with the agency for the party (technically legal in some jurisdictions; but many would think it was corrupt, regardless);
- theft of government equipment (illegal corruption);
- failure to widely advertise a bid so that a favored company can get the contract;
- the Mayor of the City asking a company that just won a city contract to hire her nephew.

### **EXERCISE.**

Write down an example of **legal** corruption.

**4. Institutional Corruption :** This is a situation where the integrity of the entire organization is affected. It is defined as influences (power and money) in an economy of influences (not just one person doing it--the whole group operates this way); it must also decrease the effectiveness of the organization and decrease public trust. What is interesting is that the acts are LEGAL. If there is institutional corruption in your government, there can still be many good people working there, but the structure of the government is set up so that there is not complete loyalty to the citizens--powerful influences act on the government and shift priorities away from the citizens.

To illustrate, imagine that a government employee's purpose should be focused 100% on the needs of the citizens, the "people". This will be shown as "north" on this compass:

But instead, powerful influences come into play, like a magnet, and get the official or employee to shift their loyalty to these other influences, pulling them off of true north--their commitment to the citizens:

This can be completely legal and good people can participate in it. ("It's just the way things are done around here.")

It's just that instead of serving the citizens, the loyalty of the government employees and officials is now primarily focused on helping these more powerful influences.

We must still must rely on individuals (either internally as employees or externally as citizens) to reverse this institutional corruption. But first you must recognize when it is happening. Have you ever seen a decision that was good for the citizens, the people, reversed or cut back for political reasons? Many times, if people voice objections to what is happening, they are told "we have checked with the lawyers and this is completely legal"; yes, but is it the right thing to do?

### **Example of Institutional Corruption:**

U.S. Congress. It was the intention of the Framers of our Constitution that Congress would be "dependent on the people alone" . But instead, members of Congress are playing a fundraising game that makes them dependent on big money donors and lobbyists. This shifts their focus as a group away from "the people". When a person gets elected to Congress, they are trained on their main priority: raising money to get re-elected. (Members of Congress were told by their political parties to devote at least 4 hours a day to fund raising.) When the financial crisis occurred in 2008, the people looked to Congress to enact laws to protect their money, their savings. Instead, billions of money flooded into Congress from the banking and financial industries. The laws were weakened to favor the banks.

### **EXERCISE.**

Watch this You Tube Video (6 minutes): [Legalized Corruption of Government Exposed by Abramoff](#).

Have you observed any institutional corruption in your government?

Write down what you have observed and your ideas as to whether or not it could be prevented and how.