

Association Executives of North Carolina

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## Educational Article

# Employer-led Ethics in the Workplace

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## Employer-led Ethics in the Workplace

Time for a brainteaser.

What's the common thread in the following HR situations:

A Muslim man fasting during Ramadan is the recipient of "good-natured" jokes at a company dinner; a hiring committee uses a fake social media account to screen potential hires; a tattooed woman faces uncomfortable questions about her appearance from coworkers; employees confront a manager about perceived favoritism in the workplace.

The answer? Workplace ethics.

During our [Thinking Differently webinar series](#) hosted monthly by Catapult CEO, Dr. Cheryl Richards, attendees looked to Renee Watkins, Human Resources Business Partner and Advisor, for her expertise on ethics in the workplace. They discussed best practices for navigating sticky-ethical situations with confidence and conscience.

Renee defines ethics as a reflection of "values, integrity and moral code." And when it comes to work-related ethics? "They're layered," she says.

How can employers and employees best navigate each "layered" ethical situation?

### HOW OFFICE CULTURE INFLUENCES OFFICE ETHICS

Frequent ethical issues may have their "main root in the culture of the organization," says Renee. Take time to really evaluate your workplace culture. A critical eye illuminates any shortcomings and helps you target the source(s).

- [Diversify Work Force](#): It's a big, big world out there and there's lots of talent to be found. So why settle for any less than what's represented? When a workplace environment is structured around employees thinking the same, having the same strengths, and even coming from similar cultural backgrounds, the probability of misunderstandings is high. In other words, when your workplace looks very uniform, it's easy to single others out.
- Provide Harassment Training: "When a lack of respect and understanding is present," says Renee, "it's time to review their harassment policy and ensure that they provide harassment training." Best practice? Train staff on the latest policies and workplace laws every two years. This includes education on anti-discrimination and anti-harassment.

### HOW ETHICS PLAY OUT IN DIFFERENT ROLES

Company leaders should be well-versed in their ability to judge what is right or wrong, but how they go about documenting, correcting and learning from ethical issues as employers isn't always as easy.

- Transparency: Transparency is the best practice in protecting workplace ethics. Consider inviting others to high-level conversations, maintaining weekly company-wide communications, and ensuring all staff has an explicit understanding of workplace hierarchy, expectations and objectives.

- **Intentional Decision-Making:** When it comes to ethical gray areas, the best foot forward is mindful decision-making. Having the ability to comfortably explain your decisions showcases ethical consideration and good intentions. Remember: You should not be defensive, but your decisions should be defensible.
- **Create Space for Growth:** Leadership positions have an ethical responsibility to help employees grow. Your role as a leader is to develop other people and the future of your business. It's not just to supervise employee tasks and activities.

Welcome conversations that focus on development by offering more than just a pat on the back. Show that you're invested in your employees' future successes and are there to actively motivate and help them achieve all they can.

- **Performance-Based Rewards:** Differentiate between unearned favoritism and rewarding employees based on performance. Always make this distinguishable and transparent to your team. When choosing someone to head a new initiative, consider the specific asks of the job and who is best suited to navigate them.

## WHERE DO ETHICS "HIDE"?

When it comes to setting an ethical tone during pre-employment, employment and post-employment, everyone holds a piece of the puzzle. However, when in doubt, HR professionals can help your organization understand best practices.

- **Document Your Process:** When it comes to recruiting talent and reducing the workforce, it's vital that your processes are well-documented. A "paper trail" and polished procedure will help your organization avoid being audited for discriminatory practices.
- **Ethical Background Checks:** Use a trusted source when screening employees. Seek background checking providers powered by a Licensed Detective Agency for more comprehensive services like criminal, driving, credit, licensing and other advanced searches as required.
- **Do Your Homework:** Better develop your internal Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging programs. Nurturing workplace diversity is essential to building a vital workforce that fuels your growth and ensures your future.

**About Catapult:** Seeking ways to evaluate workplace challenges and to create informed strategies to solve them? Explore how Catapult has helped thousands of employers with our HR project outsourcing, on-call HR Advisors, background checking and recruiting, and many other ways to strengthen and achieve your organizational goals. Learn how we plug into your business at [letscatapult.org](http://letscatapult.org).

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