



ACWA
AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY
WORKERS ASSOCIATION

Practical Ethics Series



Addressing Unprofessional or Unethical Behaviour in a Colleague

One of the most difficult and challenging issues we can face in the workplace is the unprofessional or unethical behaviour of a colleague. Dealing with unacceptable behaviour in the workplace is a fraught area simply because the relationships we have with colleagues can be a critical part of our job—these are relationships that need careful management. Sometimes we develop friendships, sometimes we are 'work friends', and sometimes we may not like a particular colleague at all. How we deal with unethical conduct by a colleague, however, should depend more on their actions and behaviour than on our relationship with them. Determining what behaviour is unacceptable in the workplace and how to deal with it should be guided by our own set of values and ethics. Below are some points to consider.

What is unethical behaviour?

In the main, organisations define unacceptable behaviour in HR policies and will include such things as drinking, illicit drug taking, theft, attendance and dress codes. Other things are implicitly dealt with by legislation. Consequently, there is a long list of things that may occur in the workplace that are inappropriate, unethical or even unlawful. If you are aware a colleague is acting unethically or unlawfully, you will need to act – one way or another. To do nothing about the unethical behaviour of a colleague is, paradoxically, also unethical. Some examples of the more common forms of unprofessional or unethical behaviour are:

- Continual lateness for client meetings and appointments
- Not providing the required duty of care and attention to a client
- Rudeness to clients or co-workers
- Use of abusive or inappropriate language
- Racism or racist slurs
- Sexism or sexist slurs
- Bullying
- Aggression and physical assault
- Misuse of prescription drugs
- Drinking at work
- Use of illicit drugs

- Sexual harassment of colleagues or clients
- A sexual relationship with a client
- Accepting or eliciting gifts from clients
- Petty theft and pilfering
- Fraud
- Misrepresentation of qualifications and/or experience

Many of these actions may also be unlawful, either because they are crimes (for example, theft, fraud, assault, illicit drug use) or because they fail to meet civil law standards (about duty of care, non-discriminatory behaviour etc.).

How to deal with unethical behaviour

The most difficult decision for a practitioner to make is whether the behaviour of a colleague is in fact unethical or unlawful and if it is, then what to do about it. Don't mistake behaviour that is merely annoying or unhelpful for something unprofessional or unethical. The organisation itself should provide guidance on the types of behaviour that are unacceptable, but there are many grey areas. Drunkenness, aggression and physical violence, and proven theft often incur instant dismissal and there is little room for deliberation. However, other less serious or less clear-cut behaviours are dealt with in a myriad of ways – from simply discussing the matter in the expectation that a change will occur, through to formal warnings and/or management of the 'problem'.

Be sure of your ground

The first rule of managing unethical or unlawful behaviour in a colleague is to have first-hand experience, not second-hand information. First-hand experience means you must be able to cite dates and occasions where you observed the behaviour. For all other situations you should encourage others to address the issue or, in the case of a client or a client's family, to make a formal complaint. Don't be tempted to take up the cudgels for another colleague about a mutual co-worker: if they believe something is amiss with the co-worker, then encourage them to take their own action.

Gauge the significance of the issue

Look at the magnitude, context and impact of the problematic behaviour. If someone is stealing or bullying or coming to work drunk, then you should act quickly and report the matter. Some problems, however, are less clear-cut. By way of example, a racist or sexist joke will occasionally be made in the workplace, and it will be tolerated without being approved of. It is, however, quite serious if a community work practitioner habitually makes racist or sexist jokes or remarks. The setting of the job and the responsibility conferred on the worker make it especially a matter of concern. One of the core principles of community work is that practitioners work to a code that specifically requires the acknowledgement and protection of human rights and human dignity, and this is especially important when working with clients; sexist and racist jokes undermine this principle.

Worse still, the telling of those jokes demonstrates that the 'perpetrator' either does not agree with the principle or does not understand how to apply it in practice. In assessing the seriousness of the behaviour, it is also important to consider its potential impact on clients as well as on co-workers.

Be prepared to address the issue yourself

Occasionally there will be colleagues who make fun of clients as a way of dealing with the stresses of the job. This is often dismissed as gallows humour, but in reality it is demeaning and is neither an appropriate nor useful way of dealing with stress. In the previous scenario, for example, there is nothing wrong with politely and firmly saying 'I find that remark racist/sexist/disrespectful...'. If it is not appropriate to address the remark at the time, then you can leave it and catch up with the person in private and explain how their remarks are inappropriate. Be prepared to defend your view on this. If the remarks persist, then you have grounds to escalate the issue and take it to a manager. If you are a manager, then you have the right to demand a change in behaviour.

All in all, it is never easy to tackle another person's behaviour but if you are sure of your facts, then as a community work practitioner working to a code of ethics, you have an obligation to address the issue directly or to report it to an appropriate person in the organisation. Ignoring the situation or sharing details with other colleagues will not make the issue go away, but it could certainly increase the risk for the client or the organisation. Whenever you can, use the organisation's policies and procedures as well as your own code of ethics to assist and guide you in this difficult process.