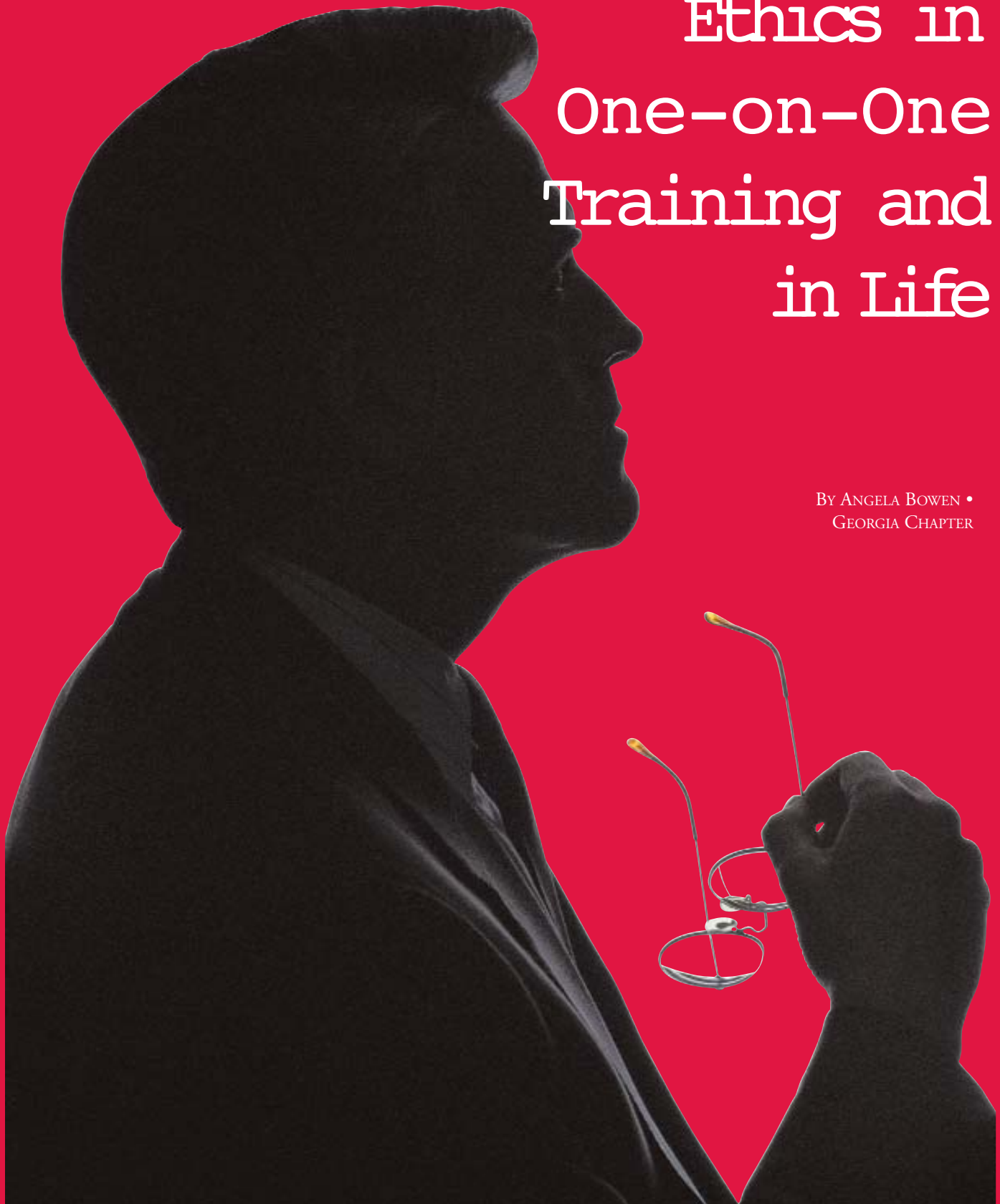


Ethics in One-on-One Training and in Life

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GEORGIA CHAPTER



“No man can lead a public career really worth leading; no man can act with rugged independence in serious crises, nor strike at great abuses, nor afford to make powerful and unscrupulous foes, if he is himself vulnerable in his private character.”

President Theodore Roosevelt wrote this in his autobiography in 1913. What did he mean? He meant it is nearly impossible to do anything worth doing if you are subject to blackmail. As people entrusted with responsibility and authority by the public, we must lead private lives that are above reproach. Too often, our ethical codes are variable, according to the setting. Some people approach ethics as if there are two different sets, personal and professional. John Maxwell, author of “There’s No Such Thing as Business Ethics,” said, “Ethics is ethics. People who try to live by one set of ethics at work and another on their personal time get into trouble.”

We, as public safety communications officers, must take a hard look at where we are as a profession ethically. While no books now on the market specifically address ethics in public safety communications, there are plenty of examples of ethical dilemmas in law enforcement, medicine and business.

Start Early

Any changes to our organizational culture must begin in the training program. As the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Institute of Ethics have found, the most effective way to change the culture of a police department is through a combination of recruiting, hiring and training.

Communications Training Officers (CTOs) play a key role in this process.

Because the topic of ethics could fill volumes, let’s stick to five basic, but not-so-simple questions:

1. What are ethics?
2. What are the consequences of unethical behavior?
3. Why is ethical behavior important?
4. How do CTOs get into trouble ethically?
5. What can we do to deal with ethical dilemmas?

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What Are Ethics?

Ethics entails not debate or discussion, but direct action and conscious decision-making. It can be hard to make a decision when we know that we may suffer for making the right decision. It is easy to identify the right thing, but much harder to do that right thing. To be an ethical person, you must be committed to doing what is right always, not just talking about it. If you are ethical only some of the time, you really are not ethical at all.

The Josephson Institute of Ethics defines the term as “How we meet the challenge of doing the right thing when that will cost more than we want to pay.” For example, if revealing wrongdoing in your center will lead to you being ostracized or vilified by your co-workers, or even cost you your job, the ethical thing would be to blow the whistle and suffer the consequences, knowing there is no better pillow to sleep on at night than a clear conscience.

What Are the Consequences of Unethical Behavior?

It’s easy to identify the professional consequences of unethical behavior: loss of certification, demotion, suspension, termination. Most of us think we will never face criminal charges, civil lawsuits or public scrutiny because of our personal decisions.

Personal loss is a real consequence of unethical behavior. Ethical violations play a significant part in depression, divorce and suicide for public safety officials. And every year, two or three times as many law-enforcement officers die from suicide than from line-of-duty death.

The better you behave, the better your life will be. Not necessarily easier, but better and more fulfilling. Moreover, those who make poor or wrong decisions eventually will fall flat on their faces. As my mother always told me, “What goes around, comes around.”

In their book, “The Power of Ethical Leadership,” Ken Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale included this saying: “Nice guys may appear to finish last, but they are usually running in a different race.”

Why Is Ethical Behavior Important?

The National Institute of Ethics identifies four key reasons for behaving ethically. First, the goal cannot be compromised. The goal of CTO programs is to develop competent professionals who bring honor and dignity to the job. This cannot be accomplished when the people doing the training are neither honorable nor competent. The integrity of any training program must start with the trainers. By allowing unethical people to train new employees, we compromise the goal, then continue the cycle later when we promote those employees to be CTOs.

Second, honesty is the cornerstone of public safety. The public entrusts us with an awesome responsibility. When a community

does not trust its public safety professionals, nothing we do can restore the confidence we need to be effective.

Third, confidentiality is critical and required by law. As a CTO, you are privy to information about personnel issues and other information that must remain confidential. Releasing confidential information can lead to a variety of problems, not only for you or your trainee, but also for your entire department. For example, many terminated employees have been reinstated because it was discovered on appeal that someone had discussed personnel issues inappropriately. Departments have been sued in federal court because an employee disclosed confidential information. (Remember that confidentiality applies to almost anything you are exposed to, not only ANI/ALI database or NCIC information.)

Fourth, efficiency and effectiveness are essential for communications training. That efficiency is degraded when we constantly change the way we make decisions. Our trainees will never know what to expect if we let our decision-making become variable. If trainees see us violating ethical principles, they may start acting like us or, worse, may slack off, figuring that their efforts to do right are not necessary.

If you have ever worked for a supervisor who made decisions based on who was involved and on personal consequences, you know this already. You may start off trying to do the right thing, be a team player and keep a positive attitude, but your commitment suffers when your supervisor or manager does not stand for anything of consequence.

As CTOs, we must understand that everything we do has a long-lasting effect. The Iroquois Nation developed a sort of constitution they called "The Great Law." One of those laws required that members of Iroquois Confederacy consider the impact their decisions would have on the next seven generations. CTOs should live by the same principle. While you may not actually influence the next seven generations of people, you can have a direct effect on the next seven hiring cycles at your agency.

How Do CTOs Get Into Ethical Trouble?

Communications officers can find ways that defy all logic to get into trouble. The most common way is by violating the appearance standard. While we cannot base our entire way of doing things on how people perceive us, we must remember that appearances are the only window the public has on our official conduct. We also must keep in mind that sometimes we try to do the right thing and end up looking as if we did something wrong. When all the public knows is how things appear, at those times, the public will think we really are doing the wrong thing.

Rejecting the appearance standard erodes public confidence in us. Once the public loses confidence in our motives, we can-

not be effective.

The confidence our trainees have in us is also eroded. How can we do our CTO jobs when the people we are training do not trust our ability to make decisions based on truth and objectivity? Trainees wonder if they can be honest with you. They wonder if you broadcast everything they tell you to the rest of the shift. They wonder if you are talking about them behind their backs, the way they have seen you do to others.

When we reject the appearance standard, we reject the possibility of allowing our trainees or the public to hold us accountable, as they should in our democratic society. If citizens cannot hold public employees accountable for their behavior, there can be no government of, by or for the people.

The National Institute of Ethics has identified a continuum of compromise that encompasses different types of ethical violations. The first step on the continuum holds acts of omission. Acts of omission occur when you knowingly fail to do something you have a responsibility to do. For example, CTOs may use the excuse that the department or the job has victimized them somehow to justify not completing a weekly training

report, saying, "I'm overworked and don't have time for all this paperwork. That's the CTO supervisor's job."

When CTOs commit acts of omission, they may believe the agency owes them something more than a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. They do just enough to get by and passively resist the rules or policies of the agency.

The next step on the continuum involves administrative acts of commission. Once an employee has deliberately avoided fulfilling required duties, his or her productivity decreases and it becomes easier to start breaking little rules that seem like obstacles to the real job. For example, instead of just failing to complete paperwork, the CTO may start being rude to trainees or co-workers, hanging up on callers, violating break policies, holding calls without permission or violating other departmental policies

and standards.

Usually, the only danger to an employee performing administrative acts of commission is departmental punishment. But, when trainees note this behavior, they question their earlier trust in the CTO and even the integrity of the department. Many trainees leave communications departments because of the apparent dishonesty and the atmosphere of unprofessional behavior by trainers and supervisors. The "little" violations are not little at all if a trainee quits because of them, goes to a neighboring agency and talks about how dysfunctional your department and training program are.

The third step on the continuum of compromise holds criminal acts of commission.

At first, CTOs may not even realize what they are doing is criminal. After years of compromise, communications officers find themselves doing things they would never have imagined

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doing when they started their careers.

Most of us do not realize how easy it is to break the law on duty. The easiest way is to release confidential information obtained through NCIC, 9-1-1 databases, CAD systems or other computer systems. This information is restricted and can be released only under strict conditions, yet it happens all the time. Communications officers give information to relatives or friends, never thinking they will be caught.

Another way to commit a crime is through off-duty behavior. Many of us develop a sense of entitlement, leading us to do things for which civilians would be arrested or given a ticket.

Imagine you are a civilian driving with your family when a car flies past you, doing 95 in a 70-mile-an-hour speed zone. The car has a "Blue Line" sticker on the back, a license-plate frame that says "My Work Number is 9-1-1" and a bumper sticker that says "Dispatchers Tell Cops Where to Go." What message has the driver of that car sent you and your family? If you as a civilian were to drive that fast, you would be lucky if all you got was a ticket. However, the offending driver has a sense of entitlement that says speed limits do not apply to him. Even if pulled over, he figures he will just show his work I.D. card and be on his way. The message to the civilians he passes is loud and clear: "I'm a dispatcher. Cops will leave me alone. I do not have to follow the speed limits, but the rest of you do. Now get out of my way."

We have our own version of the legendary "thin blue line" that separates public safety from the rest of society. We think of ourselves as loyal to our friends, our jobs and our departments. We also see ourselves as people of integrity, not willing to compromise our ideals for any reason whatsoever.

But loyalty and integrity can be mutually exclusive. Sometimes you must sacrifice loyalty to maintain your integrity or vice versa. Lying or "stretching the truth" to protect a co-worker may make you a loyal friend, but your integrity has been compromised. Every day, people are forced

Remain loyal to the mission of public safety communications and then to the department.

to choose between loyalty and integrity. Some decide based on what is in their own best interest. Others make decisions based on what is in the best interest of the department, risking personal loss to do the right thing.

As a CTO, you will face these decisions often. Your trainee may tell you something in confidence and expect that you will conceal the information. If it has even the slightest potential to cause embarrassment or harm to the department, get someone injured or result in a financial loss, you have a duty to pass the information to someone in authority. Maintaining your integrity may cause you to lose friends or even your job, but you will maintain your reputation for doing the right thing.

Sometimes, CTOs make mistakes that affect the success of

our trainees. Most of the time, no one will know about your mistake if you simply keep your mouth shut and let the chips fall where they may. But is that the right thing to do?

Another trouble area involves letting our personal problems or off-duty behavior affect our performance. Everyone has been through tough times, when concentrating on the job was almost impossible. If you are going through this type of situation, it is best to ask for a break from training until it is resolved.

Lust is another common cause of ethical lapses. The public safety arena is a target-rich environment for anyone looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right... or even Mr. or Mrs. Right Now. The best advice in these situations is to keep your hands and the rest of your body to yourself.

How Can We Deal With Ethical Dilemmas?

Remaining ethically sound is not as hard as some people try to make it. To stay on the right track, we have to do only six things:

- Conform to the policies, procedures and standards set by our agency, state and profession.
- Always maintain the confidentiality of the information we obtain through our position.
- Remain objective. When you are responsible for training the same person for a long period of time, it is sometimes hard to remain objective. We may become friends or lose our patience with him or her.
- Remain loyal to the mission of public safety communications and then to the department. If you work for someone who insists that you compromise your ethics and your mission, you may have to consider going somewhere else. If you are already a successful communications officer, you have a job skill that is marketable anywhere in the United States. Too many good centers are looking for good officers for you to work for someone who does not appreciate you and your integrity.
- Avoid any inappropriate relationships. Too often, communications officers begin relationships that are just wrong.
- Most importantly, remain technically competent. There is nothing worse than trying to teach someone something you no longer understand or can no longer do. Our instincts tell us to protect ourselves at all costs, perhaps by pretending to be competent or blaming the procedure. We must not put ourselves in this position.

For CTOs, ethical behavior is critical to fulfilling the mission of developing competent, honorable, professional communications officers. Doing the right thing, because it is the right thing to do, is the only way to live your life and lead a successful career. In the eternal words of Janis Joplin, "Don't compromise yourself. You are all you've got."

About the Author

Angela Bowen is the coordinator of communications officer training for the state of Georgia. She has more than 17 years' experience in public safety communications, including 11 as a training coordinator and manager. NOTE: The views and/or opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and in no way represent the views and/or opinions of the Georgia Public Safety Training Center.