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**Ethics Matters!**

**The Key to Being Ethical?**

Not familiar with Tenet 13 of the ICMA Code of Ethics? Wondering whether you missed an update as the version of the Code hanging on your wall only has 12 Tenets? Are you getting ready at this point to search the website for the holy grail of ethics advice? Well, here it is . . . in the conduct of your personal and professional life just adhere to Tenet 13: Don’t be stupid!

For those who may be offended by this blunt or seemingly simplistic advice offered on a complex issue, reflect for a moment on the unethical acts committed by public officials, including members of the local government profession, over the course of the past year. Many have as a root cause carelessness, unreasoned thinking, and an exasperating lack of common sense.

How many times upon hearing these stories have you exclaimed, "What were they thinking?" Well, the answer appears to be that they weren’t. The price paid for their actions has been steep: public humiliation, embarrassment for the organizations they served, cratered careers, and hurt among their colleagues, friends, and family.

Consider adhering to these Tenet 13 guidelines to stay out of ethical jeopardy:

**Tell the truth, always.** If you have failed to do so or have been subject to misinterpretation, correct the record quickly. Never engage in a cover-up. Remember that those words "under oath" mean something.

**Be crystal clear in your communications.** Whether it is negotiating that next position or giving direction to your staff, your communication needs to be clear, concise, and free of ambiguity. With regard to job offers, do not say yes until you are satisfied with all aspects of the offer and completely sure that you can commit.

**Use e-mail carefully.** Would you ever send out a snail-mail letter on the city or county letterhead that expresses your anger, tells off-color jokes, makes personal comments to a colleague, or provides an assessment of the competency of others, including your supervisors? Of course not! E-mail is not private. It is just another version of written correspondence, so use it carefully, keep it brief, and focus on business. The same advice applies to using your work cell phone to send text messages.

**Use all electronic communication outlets sensibly.** Again, nothing electronic is private, and friends and fans are not forever! Even if you judiciously limit access to your site, the pictures and comments posted on Facebook and other social media sites can easily be shared with those outside your network. And if they are the least bit sensational, be assured that they will be shared.

**Don’t date an office colleague.** It doesn't work. A public sector risk manager offered two rules of relationship management: Rule 1: Never sleep with a subordinate employee. Rule 2: If you break Rule 1, never, never, never stop. While there are often moral dilemmas to consider in personal relationships, dating a subordinate employee creates an enormous risk for the organization that you pledged to protect. And if you happen to be the city or county manager, trust me that there is simply no way to build a structure that gets you arm’s length from the issue.

**Manage the stress with healthy choices.** Choosing poor outlets to deal with work and life stress can be devastating for those in public service.

**Recognize that no one is above the law.** Ditto for work rules. What defense do those who play a leadership role in the organization have if caught driving while intoxicated; circumventing compensation, hiring, or purchasing procedures; or misusing credit cards and other public resources?

**Read the ICMA Code of Ethics.** Do you know how many times members run afoul of the Code because they simply did not know what they had agreed to when they joined ICMA?

Last, remember the thoughts of writer and philosopher Elbert Hubbard, who said, "Genius may have its limitations, but stupidity is not thus handicapped."