

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

SORTING RIGHT FROM WRONG

BY PEGGY KERNS

Alaska's code of ethics states the obvious: "High moral and ethical standards among public servants in the legislative branch of government are essential to assure the trust, respect, and confidence of the people of these states."

But it goes on to make a point that might not be so evident: "No code of conduct, however comprehensive, can anticipate all situations in which violations may occur. Laws and regulations regarding ethical responsibilities cannot legislate morality, eradicate corruption, or eliminate bad judgment."

Alaska couldn't have said it better. Laws have their place, but ethics cannot be legislated.

We all try to be ethical people. If we are public servants, we have an enormous responsibility to operate with high ethical standards. It starts with obeying ethics laws and rules. Legislatures put into law the do's and don'ts, and following them ensures that public officials act legally. These laws do not make a lawmaker ethical, however. Ethics are much more than that.

IT'S NOT ALWAYS CLEAR

Ethics are the standard of what is right and wrong, and they are based on our values. Being ethical requires making a moral judgment, and that's not always easy. Ethical behavior takes courage and has to be practiced. Public officials feel added pressures. The ethical choices we make often occur in the public arena, often under the media's lens.

Most of us don't think a lot about ethics as we go through our daily lives. We may display our ethical core in many ways, but we usually don't talk about it. Every once in a while, however, we face a decision that has us stop and ask: What should I do? If there is a law to guide us, it's easy—follow it. If instincts tell you it's a clear choice between right and wrong, follow your instincts. Although you may occasionally be tempted, these right-versus-wrong dilemmas are usually solved quickly.

But the choice isn't always so clear, and there aren't always rules to follow. Do I vote to put more money into education or health care?

Peggy Kerns is the director of NCSL's Center for Ethics. Adapted from the Institute for Global Ethics seminar in Ethical Fitness®, and its Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision Making; Josephson Institute of Ethics, Making Ethical Decisions; and Santa Clara University, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, A Framework for Ethical Decision Making.

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