



WHEN INTERESTS COLLIDE

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON

Imagine a scenario where you represent a landowner in an easement case with a public agency. The week before you are scheduled to testify, the firm representing the agency calls and offers you substantial work with them on another case. While there is no specific mention of the impending case, you get the distinct impression that your favorable testimony would greatly enhance the amount of work you receive. What should you do?

First you must ask yourself whether your action can hurt your reputation for quality service and fair dealing. If you abide by the IRWA Code of Ethics, then your decision is clear.

Now let's change the circumstances. You are serving on an IRWA committee that could impact your company. Your vote to increase the educational standards will elevate the profession, but it could put your company at a competitive disadvantage for at least a year while you budget for the increased requirements. Do you vote for what is best for the profession or for what is best for your company?

Again, the answer is simple if you apply the same ethical code to your leadership responsibility. Unfortunately, the pull to use our position to further our personal situation can be much more complicated, especially when your interests collide.

TOUGH CHOICES

When a conflict of interest arises, a leader's performance communicates their true desire to build a reputation for fair and trustworthy service. Here are four ideas to help you chart the best course of action:

Be aware. Imagine carrying out your leadership responsibilities while wearing a two-sided button. One side reads "Leader" and the other reads "Liar." Now imagine that each person you come into contact with is asked which side best reflects their perception of your performance and behavior. Turned one way, your button reflects your status as a leader. Turned the other direction, you are branded as a liar. Which way would your button turn?

Leaders are evaluated every day by their ability to earn and maintain the trust of others. Without that trust, people protect their own interests—often to their own long-term detriment. Be aware. Even if your decision seems minor, there is still a chance that it can be interpreted as a conflict of interest by others.

Be clear on your perspective. What makes a conflict of interest so challenging is that every option can feel right depending on your point of view. It becomes critical to have total clarity when you chart your course of action. For example, it is perfectly appropriate to act in your own best interest when making personal decisions, as long as you do not violate your professional obligations for ethical conduct. However, when you are serving in an IRWA leadership role, doing what is best for your company or personal situation would be improper. The only perspective that matters is the one that reflects your primary responsibility at the time.

Think long-term when making the choice. The Ethics Litmus Test published in the March/April 2013 issue of this publication included six key questions to help you to focus on what is right. Two of those questions strike to the heart of fairness and a long-term approach to building trust: Would the results be beneficial for all if everyone made the same decision? Will you think well of yourself when you look back on your decision?

Don't judge your own case. When elected officials are called on to address a conflict of interest, some people might find that ironic. But the fact is, the majority of elected leaders operate from the highest standards of integrity. There is one guiding principle that allows them to navigate the multiple conflicts that they are presented with on a daily basis: Never judge your own case. If you are in doubt about your course of action when faced with a conflict of interest, ask for guidance from people you respect and trust.

Leadership is ultimately about our ability to influence others. That happens best when there is absolutely no doubt that our integrity and credibility are intact. Our ability to earn and sustain trust is enhanced by our ability to do what is right when conflicts of interest collide.

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