

How & Why a Department or Jail Becomes Corrupt

By Neal Trautman, Ph.D. ©

Virtually every significant case of employee misconduct had warning signs that leaders either ignored or failed to recognize as important. Furthermore, leaders themselves lie at the core of both the cause and solution to corruption. Past research has repeatedly confirmed that most scandals start with one employee doing relatively small unethical acts and grows to whatever level the leadership allows.

We now understand however, that administrators play a much more direct and powerful role in both the prevention and promotion of misconduct. The “rotten apple” theory that some administrators propose as the cause of their demise has usually been nothing more than a self-serving, superficial façade, intended to draw attention away from their own failures.

Few events are more devastating to an organization than a scandal. Understanding how they begin and evolve is necessary to prevent them. Yet, a much more important requirement for stopping corruption is for administrators to have the courage to acknowledge they have integrity needs.

Phase One

Administrative Indifference Toward Integrity

Many administrators are instantly resentful and defensive at the mere inference that they are or have been ever been indifferent to ethics and integrity. Actions speak louder than words, however. The reality is that most workplaces are filled with employees who have never had any ethics training. Furthermore, the vast majority of workers in America feel far more stress from rampant backstabbing, internal politics, hidden agendas and blatant unfairness, than they do from simply doing their job.

At first glance it seems illogical that the upper administration of an organization would not be deeply committed to maintaining a high level of organizational integrity. After all, employee misconduct leads to civil suits, negative publicity, ineffectiveness and devastating morale. Chief administrators who have found themselves terminated will confirm that these and similar circumstances were used to justify their termination.

It is this widespread indifference that serves as the initial breeding ground for future misconduct to begin. The daily operations of a law enforcement agency most sensitive to mere integrity-related indifference are ignoring:

1. Poor Recruitment and Hiring You can't change the character of someone after they become your employee. If you hire a thief, he or she will usually continue to steal while they are at work. One of the most effective ways to maintain integrity will always be to hire exceptional people, for problems such as cynicism, dishonesty or apathy are automatically prevented.
2. Placing New Employees With Poor Role Models When new workers spend time with senior employees who are cynical, apathetic, dishonest or degrade leaders peer pressure usually prompts the “new hires” to acquire the same beliefs. Having an “on-the-job” training program comprised of trainers with negative attitudes creates an organizational culture that allows employees to rationalize their own misconduct through the belief that the management are their enemies.

3. Administrative or Political Interference Whether the interference involves politicians in a government setting or the upper administration of a corporation, there are five particularly harmful forms of interference. Research has revealed that these actions have repeatedly been a direct cause of significant workplace corruption. They include:
 - Causing the hiring standards of a workplace to be lowered,
 - Causing employee promotions or transfers to be unfair,
 - Taking actions which result in worker discipline being inconsistently or unjust,
 - Not providing sufficient resources. Examples of this are withholding budget funds so that employees are substantially understaffed or face unfair compensation.
 - Causing government entities to enforce laws unfairly.

4. Allowing Leaders to Role-Model Misconduct No one should expect non-supervisors to want to hold themselves accountable for their own integrity when they see managers or administrators routinely committing an assortment of unethical acts. Having a supervisor who demeans subordinates or knowing a manager who is cheating on his wife with his secretary encourages other workers rationalize that stealing the stapler or falsifying the overtime log isn't nearly as bad as what the leaders are doing.

5. Anger and Frustration The stark reality is that most people who go to prison for work-related crimes feel entitled to the money or property they are stealing. They literally become blinded by their bitterness and anger toward their employer. Try to find anyone in America who doesn't feel more stress more their own workplace, as opposed to simply doing their job. It's difficult to find one.

6. The Lack of Accountability There is only one correct way for administrators to start addressing accountability, determine what obvious ethical problems they have been ignoring, openly acknowledge the problems and begin to resolve them. Without this initial step, the "brass" become hypocrites and the typical worker uses those obvious ethical problems, like unfair promotions, to justify continued cynicism or dishonesty.

7. The Code of Silence The phenomenon commonly referred to as the code of silence exists within virtually all organizations, for it refers to the bond of loyalty. It is natural and expected for people who spend considerable time together, have the same responsibilities or share similar adversities to become loyal toward each other. The challenge that has never been achieved and validated for to be able to mold the culture of a workplace to where loyalty to honor and integrity truly becomes more important than peer pressure and loyalty to another person.

8. Ignoring the Personal Needs of Employees No one passes through life without experiencing significant personal problems. Whether it's the pain of divorce or agony of substance abuse, personal problems come to work with people. Many, many documented scandals would have been prevented if the employer had helped those in need.

9. Poor Employee Retention Keeping the best and brightest employees has never been more difficult, as employers actively compete against each other to hire and most qualified and continually try to steal the best away. Valid studies repeatedly confirm that

the most effective way to retain good workers is to treat them with respect, appreciation and fairness.

10. Poor Promotion/Transfer Selection Because role-modeling is so influential, ensuring that the individuals selected as first line-supervisors or those placed in critical positions is vital to the future of the agency. Sergeants serve as the first line of defense against wrongdoing, for they either condone and ignore minor transgressions, or confront and stop them. Personnel selected as drug agents, evidence custodians, school resource officers or assigned to work in high crime areas will face additional temptations and dilemmas.
11. The lack of Courage The most pervasive and destructive form of employment misconduct is top administrators intentionally ignoring the obvious ethical problems within their organization. Based upon my experiences of instructing over 600 integrity leadership seminars working with severely corrupted organizations, most administrators fully understand what's going on, but merely want "get to retirement" without anyone finding out. If the scandal breaks before they retire, attempting to lie their way out of the situation is the norm. One of the common denominators of virtually all national scandals is that selfishness and cowardice of top leaders allow the misconduct to grow like a cancer and destroy many innocent people.

Phase Two Ignoring Obvious Ethical Problems

Since it is clearly in the best interests of an administrator to prevent misconduct, why aren't leaders more dedicated to stopping unethical behavior? In this phase of the continuum, leaders who are not committed to integrity can be categorized into three distinct levels according to their behaviors.

- At the least harmful level are administrators who don't devote resources to enhancing or maintaining ethical standards, but are not negative role models themselves.
- The second level of severity is comprised of leaders who intentionally look the other way and ignore acts of indiscretion by workers, even though they continue to grow in severity and frequency.
- Lastly, the most despicable are those who "cover up" misconduct rather than admit the truth and attempt to rectify the situation.

The failure of leadership to address internal integrity needs is more than just indifference at this phase because the needs are more recognizable and serious. Intentionally ignoring obvious ethical problems is primarily caused by two problems: a lack of knowledge and self-centeredness. Although these leadership failures usually lead to devastating consequences, they can be prevented and corrected.

Lack of Knowledge

In this instance, misconduct occurs because administrators don't know what they can do to prevent or stop it. This is a circumstance where leaders have the courage and desire to enhance integrity, yet lack the knowledge, skill or ability to carry out their good intentions. Their lack of training doesn't excuse them from being responsible. It is however, the primary reason that misconduct was able to flourish. They must still hold themselves accountable for ensuring they learn how to implement and maintain the state-of-the-art in preventing misconduct.

Not even knowing what the major “root causes” of corruption are means they can grow like a cancer until it is too late. This lack of specific knowledge will have disastrous results. Analyze virtually any major scandal in the last few decades and some combination of the following will have caused it:

*Allowing poor leadership role models to exist (particularly degrading supervisors),
Having disgruntled employees train new workers,
Conducting ineffective background investigations,
Permitting political interference to lower hiring and promotion standards,
Allowing a lack of accountability to flourish, and
Ignoring the perception of workers feeling victimized (as explained by Gilmartin and Harris in the Continuum of Compromise ©)*

Self-centeredness

The second reason some leaders don't do more about clear ethical problems is that they believe bringing attention to their integrity needs could hurt them personally. Encouraged by the hope they will escape scrutiny and criticism if no one brings attention to the situation, their self-centeredness becomes more important than maintaining integrity.

Administrators must always rise above the belief that they may look like a hypocrite to mandate ethics training. The reality is that if the organization has evolved to this phase in the continuum, they will look hypocritical. Here lies yet another example of why courage is the greatest quality of leadership. There can be no place for a leader who is afraid to improve integrity because it may bring harsh criticism for past misconduct they condoned by ignoring it.

Phase Three

Hypocrisy and Fear Dominate the Culture

This phase of the continuum is only possible after an administration has orchestrated several years of indifference and deliberately ignored the ethical needs of their organization. This phase is characterized by several clear symptoms that must be resolved, or the likelihood of significant corruption is eminent.

Fear

By this stage of the evolution, fear has manifested itself in several forms. The most harmful consequence of fear is that the administration's role modeling of ignoring integrity has prompted the majority of supervisors to do the same. Although it is never in a policy manual, every manager and supervisor knows that politics and hidden agendas decide which leaders will continue to be promoted and who will be ostracized or pushed aside.

Thus, if you want to prosper or even merely survive as a leader you are forced to abide by the unwritten rules of internal politics. The frustration of being treated with such disrespect and hypocrisy causes supervisors to privately discredit the administrators in front of employees. What began as indifference has now grown into a cancer, destroying morale, productivity and dedication.

Extreme bitterness

Because all employees want to be treated with dignity and respect, an indication of serious misconduct has begun within a workplace is that employees have become deeply resentful over the way they are treated. Overt warning signs of this degree of resentfulness are:

- Constant harsh criticism by large groups of people,
- Open defiance of administrators,

- Workers rationalize doing unethical things during conversations with each other.

Hopelessness

When workers no longer feel there is any hope for improvement and no way out of their unbearable working conditions, they can justify doing unethical things that would have been unthinkable in the past. If people are robbed of their dignity by insecure direct supervisors and find themselves surrounded by the “everyone else is doing it” mentality, misconduct is guaranteed.

Confirmation of this fact can be found in the most extensive research ever conducted on serious law enforcement misconduct. The circumstances surrounding all 2,296 local and state officers totally decertified between 1990 and 1995, were analyzed by the National Institute of Ethics. One of the most glaring realities was that 91% of all decertified officers had not been promoted and had been employed an average of 7.2 years and were resentful.

Phase Four

Hopelessness and Despair

This final and ultimate level of the Continuum of Corruption is dominated by the pervasive intention of most employees to now do whatever it takes to just survive. While the particular circumstances dictate the specific forms of misconduct, there are several common denominators organizations experiencing this phase usually possess.

- The administrator’s lack of knowledge regarding how to prevent unethical acts, combined with the refusal to address it, prevents any attempt to enhance integrity.
- Good, honest employees fear the corrupt, dishonest ones.
- A long tradition of ignoring misconduct has convinced employees are that leaders want misconduct covered up, rather than exposed or corrected.
- The code of silence is both condoned and privately encouraged.
- There is a predominate, unwritten priority to “keep corruption out of the newspapers” at all costs.
- Employees who should be fired, arrested and decertified are allowed to quietly resign,
- Chief administrators believe they would be fired if the truth about corruption were known, so they hide misconduct rather than try to resolve it.
- No one thinks the situation will get any better.

The Best Solutions to Corruption

Truly great leaders do much more than merely supervise or administer. They have a reputation and are remembered for their courage to stand steadfast, sometimes at their own demise, for doing what is right and just. They are individuals who have always remained uncompromising with regard to integrity.

The most effective solutions to corruption must be instilled with straightforwardness and honesty. Before implementing the following recommendations, be certain to determine if any existing integrity needs are pervasive enough that instituting these improvements could make the administration appear hypocritical. The most common example of this mistake is conducting ethics training before leaders have begun to resolve the fact that some employees are blatantly treated with a lack of respect and dignity.

Solution One – Ensure Quality Recruitment and Background Investigations

The most important element of any organization's hiring process is the background investigation. The best predictor of future behavior has been and will always be past performance. Consequently, the most crucial requirement for having superior background investigations is a sincere commitment from the upper administration to do what it takes to guarantee it.

Solution Two - Have A High Quality FTO Program

It is disheartening that the national standard of field training programs has remained relatively stagnant for several decades. Most programs struggle with a variety of serious problems such as poor communication, standardization, FTO selection process, compensation and support from administrators. Unfortunately, the state-of-the-art for field training is much more effective and efficient than the national standard. Implementing the *cutting edge* of field training helps to ensure that FTOs are not angry and frustrated. As a result, a positive organizational culture within the patrol division is much more likely.

Solution Three – Fight Political Interference

Political favoritism and interference has always been a detriment to law enforcement. Although it generally isn't as extreme as that of the 1800's, it can still be a severe obstacle to professionalism. Today's interference typically attacks four aspects of a government by lowering hiring standards, interfering with promotions, not providing needed resources and interfering with discipline. The best solution is usually to educate local officials about the consequences of doing so.

Solution Four – Ensure Consistent, Fair Accountability

The continual lack of accountability is very destructive to the culture of an organization. Ethical accountability will be one of the most used aspects of preventing unethical acts in the next decade. Acknowledging that there is little or inconsistent accountability is particularly painful for many administrators, as the leaders are probably to blame. The upper administration is the only correct place to start when you truly want to improve accountability because they are usually offenders themselves. They must set an example by holding themselves accountable for starting to resolve integrity needs.

Solution Five – Conduct Effective Career Survival Training

Even though it is law enforcement's greatest training need, most agencies have never conducted internal ethics training. The specific topics that will be best for most agencies are the major causes of misconduct, the Continuum of Compromise© (Gilmartin and Harris), ethical dilemma simulation training that anchors a decision-making process into long-term memory, researched facts about bad cops, intervening to save fellow officers, the need for ethical courage and the Corruption Continuum©. Every effort should be made to teach these topics through interact, hands on video case studies.

Solution Six – Accept Nothing Less than Positive Leadership Role Models

Supervisors act as trainer, counselor and mentor for all employees. As a result of their constant contact and formal power, they become major role models. The importance of the relationship is vital for developing traits such as sincerity, loyalty, honesty, respect and dedication. Role modeling is the greatest single source of power as a leader. Actions do speak louder than words. It is impossible for any company, association or agency to be filled with integrity if line supervisors are unethical, for role modeling can also be used to instill corrupt behavior.

Solution Seven – Prevent Officers From Becoming Angry and Bitter

The Continuum of Compromise ® as developed by Kevin Gilmartin and Jack Harris, notes that officers perceiving sense of victimization can lead to them committing a series of progressively

worsening unethical behaviors. Their perception of being a victim makes it easier for them to rationalize misconduct.

Solution Eight – Implement An Effective Employee Intervention Process

Employee intervention can now be implemented in two distinct forms; computer software and internal training. The software will permit the tracking of performance so there can be intervention for those whose performance has been outstanding, as well as for employees who could benefit from intervention to provide assistance to correct performance deficiencies.

The other form of contemporary intervention is training. It should assist in establishing a mindset that when an officer begins to exhibit misconduct, other officers are usually the only ones who can intervene to prevent them from destroying their career.

Solution Ten – Make Character and Role-Modeling Highest Consideration For Promotion

First line-supervisors or those placed in critical positions are vital to the future of any agency. Sergeants serve as the first line of defense against wrongdoing, for they either condone and ignore minor transgressions, or confront and stop them. Personnel selected as drug agents, evidence custodians, school resource officers or assigned to work in high crime areas will face additional temptations and dilemmas.

Solution Ten – Having the Courage to Acknowledge and Resolve Integrity Needs

In the end, most employees have only one legacy to leave after they are gone... their integrity. Moral heroism lies at a much higher level than physical heroism, for those facing an ethical dilemmas usually have the time to understand the likely consequences they will endure if they select to “do the right thing.”

Neal Trautman, Ph.D., is the Director of both the Global Institute of Law Enforcement Supervision at the University of Southern Mississippi and the National Institute of Ethics. He is also president of the International Association of Ethics Trainers, the former chair of the IACP Ad Hoc Ethics Training committee, co-chair of the IACP Police Ethics Image Committee and has authored ten published books. He can be reached at (228) 214-3507.

