

# THE ON-THE-JOB ETHICS TEST

*By Mark Pastin*

Today's workplace is no longer the bastion of Ward Cleaver, with his white, short-sleeved shirt and cup of "one cream one sugar." Companies today are as likely to have as many bicycles in the parking lot as minivans, and as many sandals under the desks as penny loafers. Different workers, be they Boomers, dot-com thirty-somethings or even the young members of "Generation Y," each tend to bring a different sense of ethics to the workplace.

The Council of Ethical Organizations, based in Alexandria, Va., has been advising businesses, government, and the public on operating ethically and effectively since 1980. Whether you're 23 or 53 you can gain better understanding of your ethics and the ethics of the people you work with by taking the Council's On-the-Job Ethics Test.

**1. If my boss asked me to lie to cover one of his/her mistakes, I would:**

- A. Quit.
- B. Lie.
- C. Say it made me uncomfortable.
- D. Do it this time, but refuse if it became a pattern.

**2. If I knew that a fellow employee spent time in the office writing personal e-mail, I would:**

- A. Report the employee to our supervisor.
- B. Keep an eye on the employee to make sure it doesn't affect her work.
  - C. Talk to the employee, and then decide what to do.
  - D. Try to convince the employee that this may not be a good idea.

**3. If I knew my boss and a coworker were having an affair, I would:**

- A. Try to transfer to another department.
- B. Ignore it.
- C. Wait to see if I were affected.
- D. Talk to my boss to clear the air.

**4. If a headhunter approached me with an attractive offer, I would:**

- A. Discuss it with my boss before proceeding.
- B. Ask my current employer to beat the outside offer.
- C. Meet with the headhunter, and talk to my boss if I was serious about leaving.
- D. Ask each side for their best offer and take the highest offer.

**5. If I thought an employee I supervised had a drug problem, I would:**

- A. Exercise my right to ask the employee to take a drug test.
- B. Wait and see if the employee's performance declines.
- C. Talk it over with the employee.
- D. Seek guidance from the human resources department.

**6. If a fellow employee was being discriminated against because of his/her sexual orientation, I would:**

- A. Document the problem.
- B. Offer my support if the employee complained.
- C. Complain to a superior likely to be sympathetic.
- D. Advise the person that he or she might be happier elsewhere.

**7. If I took a job with a competing company, I would:**

- A. Never use information from my current job.
- B. Use information to support my new employer.
- C. Use only general information.
- D. Talk to my own lawyer before using information.

**8. If a key software vendor who was also a personal friend offered me a free laptop, I would:**

- A. Turn it down and report the vendor to our purchasing officer.
- B. Accept the gift if it was personal rather than business related.
- C. Ask my supervisor if there was a problem with accepting the gift.
- D. Accept the gift but tell the vendor that they will get no special consideration.

## TEST KEY

There is no strictly “right” answer to any of the test questions, but some who take the test show identifiable patterns of ethical approach. Based on years of experience in workplace ethics research and consulting, the Council has identified four such patterns.

If you answered **A** most often, you are a **Conformist**. You tend to be inflexibly “by-the-book.” You will run into work-related ethical conflicts unless you work for an organization with rigid rules and little room for compromise.

If you answered **B** most often, you are a **Negotiator**. You tend to try to make up the rules as you go along. You will eventually run into trouble if your job requires you to exercise judgment without guidelines.

If you answered **C** most often, you are a **Navigator**. You have a basically sound moral compass as well as flexibility to make ethical choices even when none of your alternatives is perfect. You can act ethically and succeed in most organizations, but will leave those that are unethical.

If you answered **D** most often, you are a **Wiggler**. You will run into trouble when others sense that you dodge ethical issues to protect your own interests.

(Mark Pastin, president of the Council of Ethical Organizations in Alexandria, VA, is a long-time adviser to corporations and associations worldwide. [www.corporateethics.com](http://www.corporateethics.com).)

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