



United States  
**Office of Government Ethics**  
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March 13, 2001  
DO-01-007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Designated Agency Ethics Officials

FROM: Amy L. Comstock  
Director

SUBJECT: Results of the Executive Branch  
Employee Ethics Survey 2000

The Office of Government Ethics (OGE) is pleased to issue the results of the [Executive Branch Employee Ethics Survey 2000](#) (the survey). Arthur Andersen developed and conducted the survey for OGE and prepared the report. The report, together with the survey instrument, is available in its entirety on our Web site at [www.usoqe.gov](http://www.usoqe.gov).

The survey had two primary purposes. The first was to assess the effectiveness of the executive branch ethics program, from an employee perspective. The second was to assess executive branch ethical culture. To accomplish these objectives, the survey questions related to several primary measures:

- **Program Awareness:** Are employees aware of the ethics program in their agencies?
- **Program Effectiveness:** Do employees believe the ethics program is effective? For example, do they rely on ethics officials for advice? Is ethics training provided by the agency useful?
- **Agency Culture Factors and Outcomes:** How do employees perceive, within their agencies, various aspects or "factors" of organizational culture that are thought to be associated with effective ethics management? For example, do employees perceive that their agencies' leadership pays attention to ethics, that ethics concerns are discussed openly, and that there is consistency between policy and practice? Additionally, how do employees perceive, within their agencies, a variety of

"outcomes" that are thought to exist within organizations that have strong ethical cultures? For example, do employees perceive that employees within their agencies recognize ethics issues when they arise and that they seek advice?

The survey was distributed to a random sample of 7,291 civilian employees from 22 executive branch departments and agencies. A total of 2,704 responses were received, for a 37 percent response rate. There were three key employee demographic variables on which the above-mentioned primary measures were analyzed: supervisory status; work location within or outside the Washington, DC area;<sup>1</sup> and financial disclosure report filing status (public filer, confidential filer, non-filer). Survey responses were analyzed on an executive branchwide basis, rather than agency-by-agency.

Some key findings and recommendations from the final report are summarized below:

**1. Employees are generally aware of the ethics program and familiar with ethics resources, but there are gaps.**

Overall, more than 75 percent of respondents said they were aware that there are officials in their agency whose job responsibilities include providing advice to employees on ethics issues. Awareness is far greater among officials required to file public financial disclosure reports (99 percent) or confidential financial disclosure reports (95 percent). Awareness is also significantly higher among supervisors than non-supervisors.

While these results are encouraging, the study also indicates that there are needs that the ethics program has not met. In the last five years some employees, for example, sought ethics advice from persons other than their agency ethics officials because they did not know there was an ethics staff or because they believed there was no ethics staff. Other employees reported that they would have sought ethics-related advice in the last five years but did not know whom to ask. The final report recommends that the Government explore ways to improve communication to employees, so that fewer will have needs that are unaddressed.

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<sup>1</sup>Few differences were found when comparing employees in the Washington, DC area with those in other work locations.

**2. The program is working, but there is room for improvement.**

Employees receive ethics training via various training methods including in-person instructor-led lecture, videotape, computer-based training, reference materials, etc. They report that, overall, in-person, instructor-led training is the most effective method of training, while opportunity to examine regulations, statutes, and other legal resource materials is the least effective method. On a 5-point scale, employees rate the usefulness of training 3.76 in terms of making them more aware of ethics issues in connection with their work. Public and confidential filers rate the usefulness of training higher (4.09 and 3.98, respectively).

Study results indicate that, over the past 5 years, 46 percent of all survey respondents received some form of ethics training at least once per year. Eighty-nine percent of public filers said they received training at least once per year, as did 77 percent of confidential filers. It appears, therefore, that 11 percent of public filers and 23 percent of confidential filers are not receiving the ethics training they are required to receive.

More positively, employees are willing to seek ethics advice. In the past 5 years, overall, 24 percent report seeking advice in connection with their work. Again, public filers (71 percent) and confidential filers (50 percent) were more likely to seek ethics advice.

Employees generally sought out agency ethics officials as their resource for advice. In the past 5 years, overall, 59 percent of those employees seeking advice consulted their agency ethics officials, while 41 percent used other resources. On a 5-point scale, they rated the helpfulness of agency ethics officials 4.28, as compared with an average of 3.57 for other resources consulted. Again, public filers (93 percent) and confidential filers (83 percent) more often relied on their agency ethics officials for advice and rated the helpfulness of those officials higher (4.61 and 4.45, respectively).

On questions relating to program effectiveness, filers consistently gave higher ratings than non-filers. Supervisors gave higher ratings than non-supervisors.

**3. Ratings suggest employees perceive agency ethical culture as neither positive nor negative.**

Employees' overall indicate a neutral perception -- neither very positive nor very negative -- with respect to agency ethical culture. On the positive side, employees tend to agree, if only slightly, that "ethical behavior [is] rewarded," that there is "follow-up on reports of ethics concerns," and that "unethical behavior [is] punished." These results suggest employees perceive some commitment to ethics in their agencies.

Employees also tend to agree that there is "awareness when ethics issues arise." This finding is consistent with the high level of awareness about the program reported by employees in connection with the Program Awareness measure. It is significant because increasing employee awareness of ethics issues is one of the primary objectives of the executive branch ethics program.

Another positive result is that, overall, employees perceive that the incidence of "unethical behavior" within their agencies is relatively infrequent. Among the specific behaviors examined, misuse of Government time and resources was thought to occur most frequently and accepting compensation from outside sources for performing Government duties was thought to occur least frequently (3.09 and 1.59, respectively).

On the other hand, employees tend to disagree, if only slightly, that there is "open discussion about ethics," that there is "fair treatment," with consistent standards applied across employee ranks, and that there are "efforts to detect violators" of ethics standards. Employees also register slight disagreement that there is "consistency between ethics policies and practices" at their agencies. In addition, employees tend to disagree that it is "OK for employees to deliver bad news," and that "ethics [are] integrated into [agency] decision-making."

Consistent with other findings, financial disclosure report filers reported a more positive perception than did non-filers. Similarly, supervisors reported a more positive perception than did non-supervisors.

**4. Frequency of ethics training is related to the perception of a positive ethical culture.**

Results of the survey indicate that frequency of ethics training is directly related to positive perception of agency culture. Employees who received some type of ethics training at

least once a year had significantly more positive perceptions of agency ethical culture than did those who received training less frequently. The final report concludes that this finding provides the Government with a basis for improving the perception of ethical culture by providing additional ethics training. The report notes that the current approach, where training is tied to an employee's financial disclosure responsibilities, creates perceptual differences between filers and non-filers when non-filers would also benefit from more frequent ethics training.

The study notes that additional training would also have the positive effect of increasing employee awareness of the agency's ethics program. And significantly, the write-in responses to the two open-ended survey questions also support devoting more resources to training. In response to the question, "What, if anything, makes it difficult for employees to comply with ethics policies?" 22 percent of the responses cited lack of training, knowledge, or education. In response to the question, "What, if anything, would further assist employees to act ethically in connection with their work?" 39 percent of the responses indicated that more training and education would make a difference.

#### **5. Supervisors are a key resource.**

The report recommends, based on a number of findings, that supervisors be targeted for additional ethics training. First, analysis indicates the perception that, "supervisory leadership [pays] attention to ethics" has a strong relationship with a desirable agency culture, thus suggesting that efforts to get supervisors to play a more significant role in the ethics program would be worthwhile. Second, compared to non-supervisors, supervisors have more positive perceptions of agency culture, have greater awareness of the ethics program, and make greater use of program resources. These differences, moreover, persist even when controlling for filing status.

Of course many supervisors already receive annual training because they have job responsibilities that require them to file financial disclosure reports. Survey results suggest, however, that 12 percent of supervisors -- some 56,000 executive branch employees -- do not file financial disclosure reports and hence may not be receiving annual training. The report recommends that OGE consider changing the current practice of allocating training resources, under which training requirements are based on employee filing status, to include consideration of an employee's supervisory role. According to the report, this modification would

"...allocate important resources for personnel in the best position to influence behavior and outcomes - supervisors."

Presumably, additional training for supervisors would not simply duplicate that given to filers but would be tailored to take advantage of the fact that supervisors, because of their interaction with subordinates, are in a unique position to positively influence an agency's ethical culture. Thus, supervisors could be trained to emphasize or otherwise model behavior that makes the point that the agency really does value "open discussion of ethics" and "integration of ethics into decision-making."

#### **6. Participation of executive leadership is also important.**

Study results also confirm that there is a relationship between the perception that "executive leadership [pays] attention to ethics" and the perception that an organization has a strong ethical culture. As the report suggests, "Ethics programs begin at the top." Agency leadership's active and visible role in the promotion of an agency's ethics program may be critical to program success.

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This survey represents OGE's first effort to assess executive branch employee perceptions of agency ethical culture and ethics programs. The results provide a benchmark for measuring change. OGE expects that the real value of the survey will be apparent in the future as the survey will provide a means to assess the utility of program changes implemented between survey administrations.

We are interested in agency reactions to the survey, particularly the recommendations. Comments may be submitted to the Survey Taskforce, Office of Government Ethics, Suite 500, 1201 New York Avenue, NW., Washington, DC 20005-3917, Attention: Phyllis Hoffer. Ms. Hoffer may also be reached at 202-208-8000, extension 1184 or at pahoffer@oge.gov.

Again, for more detailed information on the survey purpose, methodology, and findings, please visit our Web site at [www.usoge.gov](http://www.usoge.gov).