The American Occupational Therapy Association  
Advisory Opinion for the Ethics Commission  

Ethics in Governance

Ethics in governance is about the qualities of leadership and the values expressed by the leaders themselves. Leaders set the tone and character of the organization of which they are stewards. Values are a core set of beliefs that guide actions. Ethics are derived from and based on a particular code of values (Campbell, 2003). Occupational therapy leaders are guided by the Core Values of the profession (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2015).

THE ISSUES

Leaders in volunteer organizations, such as a professional association, are frequently faced with expectations by members to increase the performance of the organization but also have limited resources and options. There are pressures to maintain or expand existing programs, membership benefits, and ideals but also to change, be innovative, be creative, and be different. In the course of performing their leadership role, people often learn important lessons about leadership as they try to deal effectively with membership expectations. The result may be ethical dilemmas and tough choices for the volunteers or elected leaders who challenge the profession’s Core Values and beliefs. Dilemmas may evolve from conflicts of interest, conflict of commitment (i.e., accepting additional roles that have a negative impact on one’s ability to meet current responsibilities), or a misunderstanding of one’s fiduciary responsibility.

The values in leadership are similar to the values in practice: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Seel, 1996). The six values are based in part on the six pillars of character developed by the Josephson Institute for Ethics (2007). Trustworthiness includes “integrity, honesty, reliability, and loyalty” (Josephson Institute for Ethics, 2007, para. 7). Respect includes dignity, tolerance, acceptance, nonviolence, and courtesy. Responsibility includes duty, accountability, pursuit of excellence, and self-control. Fairness includes justice, impartiality, and openness. Caring includes concern for others and altruism. Citizenship includes doing one’s share and respecting authority. These six values are
consistent with the Core Values of AOTA (2015): altruism, equality, freedom, justice, dignity, truth, and prudence.

DISCUSSION

These leadership values also are expressed and covered in the Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (2015) (referred to as the “Code”; AOTA, 2015). They are illustrated in this document for clarity. Trustworthiness is part of Veracity (Principle 5) and is supported by Fidelity (Principle 6). Respect is supported by Fidelity (Principle 6) and Autonomy (Principle 3). Fairness is part of Justice (Principle 4). Caring is part of Beneficence (Principle 1) and Nonmaleficence (Principle 2). Citizenship and responsibility involve all six principles. In addition, Principles 6C (conflict of interest) and 6J (resolving ethical issues in professional organizations) of the Code also are especially relevant.

Leaders need to constantly monitor their behavior to avoid the perception of seeking secondary gains from their position. For example, leaders’ ethical conduct can be challenged when they are called on to speak to members at local or state meetings and to represent AOTA at other organizational events. The content of their presentations and their conduct during their representations reflect directly on the reputation of the Association. Therefore, a volunteer who is in an AOTA leadership role must avoid projecting personal opinions, promoting his or her employer, or advocating policies that would benefit his or her employer. The principles of ethical conduct and good leadership provide sound guidance toward ensuring that AOTA will continue to be well respected and maintain its good reputation with both its members and outside groups.

Some examples of the ethical values in application may include the following statements adapted from the core values listed in the United Way of America Code of Ethics Guide (2006) and the six pillars of character suggested by the Josephson Institute for Ethics (2007):

- Promote consumer and membership confidence and trust (trustworthiness)
- Act in ways that respect the dignity, uniqueness, and intrinsic worth of every consumer and member (respect)
- Maintain the highest standards of excellence and accountability (responsibility)
- Provide fair and accurate information to all consumer and members (fairness)
- Promote individual well-being and common good for all consumers and members (caring)
• Provide effective services to consumers, community, and members (citizenship)
• Be prudent in the use of finances (trustworthiness)
• Invite the expression of different beliefs and ideas (respect)
• Be good stewards of occupational therapy knowledge, skills, and outcomes (responsibility)
• Involve consumers and members in the development and delivery of our services (fairness)
• Help transform visions of compassion into dynamic reality (caring)
• Provide leadership to multiply the impact for possible change in people’s lives (citizenship).

SUMMARY
Ethical behavior in governance is based on the same principles as the expected ethical conduct of all AOTA members. However, volunteer and elected leaders have accepted, by virtue of their position, additional responsibilities in the Association. These responsibilities include behaviors that require a higher level of ethical conduct than is expected from members without such responsibilities. The welfare and well-being of AOTA must remain the Number 1 concern of all leaders involved in Association governance. Adherence to the AOTA Code and the values on which it is based provides a sound approach to ensuring that AOTA will remain a vital force and voice in expressing the goals and objectives of the profession.

REFERENCES


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This chapter was previously published in the 2010 edition of this guide. It has been revised to reflect updated AOTA Official Documents and websites, AOTA style, and additional resources.

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