“With great power...”: The grantwriter’s responsibility to exercise their personal conscience
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The grantwriter’s professional competencies, along with their organization’s support, can move the organization closer to its goals, and to a better future for the people it serves. However, when used without the guidance of the grantwriter’s conscience, this opportunity can distance an organization from achieving its vision.

As one famous superhero said so well: “With great power, comes great responsibility.” It is the grantwriter’s responsibility to themselves, their organization, and the profession to exercise their conscience in addition to their professional competencies.

The Power of Personal Conscience

Our beliefs about right and wrong influence our actions. While we generally may agree, in the abstract, about what is right and wrong, under duress we may find that different people react differently.

When things become stressful, opportunities to cut corners often seem to surface. These may manifest in: manipulating statistics to show better outcomes for a funder; sharing stories, that were told to us in confidence, because they perfectly illustrate the point we are trying to make; or using grant funds for a related purpose, rather than the purpose for which they were granted. These decisions are driven by the rationale that this is best for the organization, and hence is the right thing to do. However, stepping back, we would probably all agree that these are ill-guided decisions. Our personal conscience is what leads us to avoid cutting those corners and guides us to keep pursuing what we see as the ethical path.

Our ability to maintain our personal compass is powerful. This compass helps us define who we are. It calls us back to something inside of us that we feel is true. Sometimes, however, our personal compass doesn’t align with the expectations of the culture that surrounds us.

Organizational Ethics

Organizations can, by a variety of both formal and informal mechanisms, either empower or discourage employees from following the dictates of conscience (p. 423).

- Rae and Wong (2004)

Organizations, just like individuals, develop their own personality, culture, and ethical standards. When I think about Pixar Animation Studios, I immediately think about employees using scooters in the building, the candy store in their lobby, and
offices that look like Walt Disney himself designed them. The organization’s personality flows through their employees, their space, and ultimately their work.

The organizations we serve are no different. Each has a distinct feeling, and both spoken and unspoken expectations of how you should behave. For example, it may not be in writing, but you understand whether employees are expected to eat together or to have lunch while continuing to work at their desks. You feel out of place if you don’t attend the holiday party because the unspoken rule is that it is expected, even if you are told that your attendance is optional. These unspoken “norms” influence your behavior.

The organization’s ethics also influence you. Your supervisor might ask you to report that more funding has come in for a project, when you know that it hasn’t. The staff bios on hand might have a few extra commission appointments or years of service than the staff members actually have. You might read an article written by a coworker, and realize that the same paragraph was published last year in an industry journal. If things like this happen regularly, it might be evidence of an underlying systemic “norm” for your organization—one that subtly influences individual decisions and behaviors, and leads to unethical practices that put the organization at risk.

If these practices don’t align with your personal conscience, your personal and organizational ethics are in conflict.

**Bridging the Divide: Professional Ethics**

In these situations, your responsibility to be true to your conscience must take precedence. In these challenging situations, it is helpful to turn to the ethics of a respected third party: those of your profession.

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) has used the combined experience of its members to create a set of guidelines that members are required to follow. GPA’s Code of Ethics is found at [http://www.grantprofessionals.org/ethics](http://www.grantprofessionals.org/ethics). An overall guideline is that all members should encourage colleagues to embrace and practice GPA’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Practice. When caught in the middle of a conflict between personal and organizational ethics, it is helpful to refer to the following statement under “Professional Obligations”: “Members shall act according to the highest ethical standards of their institution, profession, and conscience.”

We not only have an obligation to our personal conscience and the ethics of the organizations with which we work, but we also have an obligation to one another. Together, we can maintain the integrity of our profession, which, in the long-run, leads to the best outcomes for the organizations we support.