Walking the Walk is Frightening
By: Anonymous

As members of the Grant Professionals Association, we pledge to abide by a Code of Ethics. Most of us probably do not give much thought to the Code, but we should. Every word of it is essential. Today, I want to focus on four specific points relevant to my current situation.

1. Practice their profession with the highest sense or integrity, honesty, and truthfulness to maintain and broaden public confidence.
2. Adhere to all applicable laws and regulations in all aspects of Grantsmanship
3. Becomes leaders and role models in the field of Grantsmanship
4. Encourage colleagues to embrace and practice GPA’s Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Practice

Why should you care? Consider my cautionary tale of why a year ago I became a federally protected whistleblower. I have worked in this field for decades and have a national reputation as a successful grant writer. I love my job and my career, but life doesn’t always go according to plan. Becoming a whistleblower has been the most difficult professional decision I have ever made, and it has endangered my ability to be successful in many ways. But it was the right thing to do.

Why was I troubled enough to become a whistleblower?

Accident vs. Pattern of Intentional Behavior

For me, it took the recognition that the same administrators (over several years) were repeatedly serving ineligible clients in more than one grant-funded project or were paying non-grant staff out of the grant. At one point, my organization was paying people who were not even “on the clock” during the working hours claimed. The misuse of grant funds started out small but grew to more than $200,000. Finally, I had to accept it would not end without intervention.

I did not turn my back on these issues from the beginning, but I did not tell the state or federal funders about what was happening right away either. I went to the organization’s administrators and tried repeatedly to convince them that the misuse of grant funds was morally AND criminally wrong. Some of the time, they agreed to repay the funds but not every time, especially when they needed to repay substantial sums. When I exposed these wrongs, administration labeled me as a troublemaker, likely due in part to the fact they were forced to repay the funder.

The Law vs. Ethics

The intersection of the law and ethics was one of the most troubling issues I confronted during this process. I knew I was ethically responsible, but it took three lawyers to convince me I could be financially and criminally liable for the misuse of grant funds because of my job title and my
ongoing knowledge of the abuse. Those conversations were an eye opener. I could be jeopardizing my family’s financial security and even my personal freedom for people who did not seem to care about abiding by contractual agreements they had signed. After all, I was told, “It is only a problem if we get caught.” Even if I had no moral character to speak of, how could my organization expect me to take that risk with my family’s financial future?

**Personal vs. Professional Responsibility**

What will I do if they fire me? This question weighed – and continues to weigh – heavily upon me. After all, my state is an employment-at-will state. That means that I could be let go for any reason (real or imaged) with no recourse. I have ongoing family responsibilities that require considerable financial support. The lack of a paycheck (or even a reduced paycheck) would gravely hurt a family member. Should I risk this loved one’s financial security?

I have also wondered if I have the strength to continue this process (which is ongoing as nothing moves fast with the federal government). In my organization, I have come to be viewed as a troublemaker and “the enemy.” I have been accused of risking the viability of the organization, of hurting our clients, and of being selfish. Perhaps worst of all, I no longer can adequately do my job to the best of my ability. Mind you, they have not fired me (because I am protected), but I am only allowed to write limited numbers of grant proposals, and I have limited access to grant performance and expenditure records.

Many of my colleagues who know I am the whistleblower shun me, and perhaps worst of all one of my professional friends is experiencing work problems because of his association with me. I thought I had the strength to do this in the beginning, but I did not know how much strength it would take. There are days I wonder, “Is it worth it?”

It is.

Talking the talk is easy, but in my experience, walking this walk is frightening. For now, I am holding up. In the past several years, I have taken doctor ordered sick leave (which was not popular, to say the least). On a regular basis, I miss work for stress-related (induced) illnesses, and my medical expenses have increased significantly. However, with prayer and meditation, I am determined to see this process through, whatever it takes – because it is the right thing to do.

**Let’s talk the talk and walk the walk together.**

We are all accountable to ourselves, to the GPA, and to each other. It is important to remember our ethical choices affect the reputations of grant professionals across the country. So I invite you to join this conversation by emailing your comments, questions, and experiences to the GPA Grant News editor (heather@justwrite-solutions). She will serve as a conduit for the conversation to help me protect my identity. Tell me about your challenges, and over the next few months I’ll continue writing articles based on your input and my ongoing experiences. I appreciate your support!