

Tips For Approaching a Colleague When You Have an Ethical Concern

In the Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2004 version), section G addresses the issue of approaching a colleague when you have an ethical concern about his or her behavior. Here's how the section reads:

G. Maintenance of Standards

Ethical behavior among professional school counselors, association members and nonmembers, is expected at all times. When there exists serious doubt as to the ethical behavior of colleagues or if counselors are forced to work in situations or abide by policies that do not reflect the standards as outlined in these Ethical Standards for School Counselors, the counselor is obligated to take appropriate action to rectify the condition. The following procedure may serve as a guide:

- 1. The counselor should consult confidentially with a professional colleague to discuss the nature of a complaint to see if the professional colleague views the situation as an ethical violation.*

- 2. When feasible, the counselor should directly approach the colleague whose behavior is in question to discuss the complaint and seek resolution.***

- 3. If resolution is not forthcoming at the personal level, the counselor shall utilize the channels established within the school, school district, the state school counseling association and ASCA's Ethics Committee.*

- 4. If the matter still remains unresolved, referral for review and appropriate action should be made to the Ethics Committees in the following sequence:*
 - state school counselor association*
 - American School Counselor Association*

- 5. The ASCA Ethics Committee is responsible for:*
 - educating and consulting with the membership regarding ethical standards*
 - periodically reviewing and recommending changes in code*
 - receiving and processing questions to clarify the application of such standards; Questions must be submitted in writing to the ASCA Ethics chair.*
 - handling complaints of alleged violations of the ethical standards. At the national level, complaints should be submitted in writing to the ASCA Ethics Committee, c/o the Executive Director, American School Counselor Association, 1101 King St., Suite 625, Alexandria, VA 22314.*

Understandably, you may be uncomfortable with the idea of approaching a colleague whose ethical behavior is in question. On the following page are some tips for staying professional, diplomatic, and non-confrontational if you find yourself in this situation.

Tips, Suggestions, and Steps to Take:

1. If the issue is **legal** in nature rather than just ethical (such as a teacher having a sexual relationship with an minor student or any other minor, or a colleague suspected of taking money from a school fund), go to your administration rather than directly to the person, and share your concern. This will help keep you out of the legal tangle.
2. If the situation is about an ethical concern, but is not illegal, go directly to the person in question first, rather than to his or her supervisor.
3. Be aware of privacy. Talk about the issue away from other people.
4. Bring a neutral third party along if you think that's needed. Otherwise, just have the conversation with the person individually.
5. Approach the person in a friendly way, from a place of concern, not confrontation. Use "I" statements. *"I wanted to run something by you..."* or *"I want to check something out with you that I heard."* Ask for clarification. *"I just wanted to be clear about this. Is that accurate?"* Or, *"Is that actually the way it happened?"*
6. Then express your concern: *"My fear for you is..."* rather than, *"You shouldn't be..."*
7. If possible, and if the other person seems open to it, offer your help, ideas, or support. *"Is there anything I can do to help?"* is more compassionate and productive than, *"I'm telling!"*
8. If the other person is unresponsive, and you do ethically need to share information with someone else (such as the person's supervisor), let the person know what you're planning to do, unless you fear for your safety. *"I'm really uncomfortable saying this, but I do need to let _____ know about what's happening. I'm going to talk to him/her tomorrow. Do you want to come with me, or would you rather not?"* If the person says he or she will talk to the supervisor instead, make it clear that you still plan to do the same. *"I'm glad to hear it. I'll wait to talk to _____ until later in the day so you have a chance to have your conversation first."*
9. If you approach the person's supervisor, make it clear that you're doing so out of concern and let the supervisor know you've already approached the person directly. *"I have a concern I need to share with you. I've already talked with _____ about this, but I'm still not sure it's resolved and I wanted to touch base with you about it."* Seek solutions rather than punishment.
10. Document EVERYTHING! Dates, times, and specific details of how you first became aware of the situation, any and all conversations you had about it, any agreements that were reached, any next steps outlined by you, the other person, or the supervisor, and any additional steps you took or plan to take regarding this situation. Put all your documentation in a folder and keep it in a locked filing cabinet. You may never need it, but it's better to have it than not have it, just in case.