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Ethics training improves ethical conduct in Miami Beach

Ethics training of public employees has become a standard requirement in government at all levels. But is there any evidence that such training actually improves government ethics? The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (COE) believes the answer is yes, based on its recent survey of City of Miami Beach employees working in those departments believed to be the most susceptible to corruption.

Almost four years ago, the COE initiated an intensive ethics training regimen for hundreds of employees in the city's regulatory departments -- those that interact with residents and businesses in connection with enforcement of city regulations, including building and code enforcement, fire rescue, planning, finance, parking and procurement. The program, recorded by city staff, has since been utilized continuously to train new employees in the same departments. Since the original training sessions, employees' confidence in the integrity of their local government has been bolstered. That was one of the key findings of a recent survey by the COE, intended to test the impact of the program.

The COE embarked on the intensive ethics and awareness program in 2013 at the invitation of former City Manager Jorge Gonzalez, following a troubling series of ethical and criminal misdeeds in the city government. The program was carried out with the support of current Manager Jimmy Morales and the Mayor and City Commission, which appropriated funds for the project. The results of the December survey were compared with the results of a survey done three years earlier as part of the original program.

Overall, the findings suggest that Miami Beach employees in the departments surveyed are more satisfied with the city's ethical standards than they were in 2013. The recent results highlighted a number of positive trends, such as double-digit improvements with respect to the City's overall ethics and ethical standards, as well as co-worker morale.

For example, 81 percent of employees told COE they felt Miami Beach government itself was "ethical" in 2016 compared to 65 percent during the 2013 survey -- a 25 percent increase over three years. Meanwhile, 77 percent of employees said they felt enough safeguards had been implemented by management to prevent corruption in the workplace -- up significantly from 60 percent in 2013.

Additionally, 80 percent of those surveyed said it was easier to "blow the whistle" on corrupt activity, compared to 64 percent in 2013. They also feel better about reporting bad behavior according to the responses to a question about fear of retaliation for whistleblowers. In the most recent survey, 67 percent of employees felt adequate protections exist, compared to just 33 percent in 2013. The number of employees reporting a bribe offer three years ago (27 percent) was cut to 22 percent, an indication that even potential bribers may be getting the message.

The new survey showed employees seem to like the heightened emphasis on ethics, judging from the 16 percent improvement in co-worker morale over the past survey. Employees also gave higher marks to their supervisors with respect to job performance and personal ethics, the survey showed.

Ethics Commission Executive Director Joseph Centorino pointed out that the city administration should get credit for the improvement, but also said, "The results show that ethics training can raise employees' awareness of what constitutes unethical or corrupt behavior and prepare them how to deal with it." "More important," he added, "employees respect the city's efforts to recognize and correct deficiencies in dealing with and responding to ethical issues, and that significantly improves morale."

Centorino noted that Miami Beach officials have also taken the lead toward enhancing public trust by being the first municipality to embrace a "Civility Oath" for those in high positions, following the Ethics Commission's January passage of a resolution calling for local governments to adopt such a vow. Miami Beach's Mayor, Commissioners and top staff swore to "pledge fairness, integrity and civility, in all actions taken and all communications made by me as a public servant," during the City Commission meeting on February 8, 2016.

The Ethics Commission was created in 1996 as an independent agency with advisory and quasi-judicial powers. It is composed of five members, serving staggered terms of four years each. Through a program of education, outreach and enforcement, the Commission seeks to empower the community and bolster public trust.

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