

How to Run an Ethics Audit  
of Your Library Organization

PCI Webinars

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Caveat

**We are not lawyers: and neither are you.**

The *“ultimate”* authorities regarding codes of ethics and policy decisions are **your governing board members and the lawyers who would defend your library in court.**

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Key Idea

It's both **What** you do  
and **How** you do it:  
Appearances count **as much  
or more** than intentions.

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# Ethics Audit with Pat Wagner

## Outcomes

- Know how **four basic library ethical principles** translate into ethical staff behavior.
- **Evaluate library operations** on ethical issues, from how your finances are audited to how stakeholders have input into collection development.
- Review how **Florida open meeting laws** impact your library's operation.

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## Agenda

- Introduction to Library Ethics
- *What are Your Audit's Goals?*
- Laws, Rules, and Other People's Ethics
- *Stakeholders: Leaders, Staff, and Library Customers*
- Do You Walk the Talk: The Audit
- *Mistakes, Course Correction, and Resources*

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## What Are Ethics?

- The **study** of right and wrong
- Requires both a **brain** (thinking) and a **heart** (feelings)
- How we research: **Finding Facts**
- How we decide: **Processes**
- How we act: **Implementation**
- How we treat people: **Civility**

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## Sources of Library Ethics

- **The Rule of Law** (for example, the Magna Carta)
  - No group or individual is above the law.
  - Law is transparent and accessible.
  - Written agreements (policies, contracts, and laws) rule behavior, not individual personalities
- **The Bill of Rights**: Protecting individual legal rights
- **Traditions**: Common law, custom, and culture

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## Caveat

### **Ethics evolve.**

Cronyism, nepotism, bribery, *“old mammals’ clubs”*  
*“smoke-filled rooms”*, privilege, and political favoritism  
are considered *“just the cost of doing business”*  
in many communities, but that is changing...  
once upon a time few states had *“sunshine”* laws.

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## Four Library Standards

- **Fairness:** Everyone is treated the same, meaning **rules and privileges apply to everyone equally**
- **Privacy:** What people read, view or listen to, or check out from the library, is **only their business**.
- **Transparency:** Decisions are made in **public meetings** and rules are written so that **average people can understand them**.
- **Access to information:** From bilingual children's books to good lighting on the staircase, a library makes information available to people, meaning **removing barriers and improving outreach**.

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## Exercise

What makes working within  
a **written code of ethics, which  
governs everyday behavior,  
challenging?**

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## What People Say

**Not black and white: too many shades of gray**

- An unfamiliar concept to learn
- Not one set of written ethical rules to follow
- Too broad: Open to interpretation
- Other groups have their own codes
- Stakeholders have their own codes.
- Can conflict with written laws

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## Typical Goals

- Ensure **consistency** in how stakeholders are treated.
- Build the community's **trust and respect**.
- Improve employee **morale**.
- Provide **transparent** decision-making processes.
- Prepare for **difficult public dialogue**.
- Model **respectful behavior** in divisive times.
- Make **civility and manners** a workplace principle.
- **Because it's the right thing to do.**

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## Exercise

How will your audit's  
information be used and enforced?

**An audit is useless  
without a follow-up plan.**

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# Ethics Audit with Pat Wagner

## Homework – Who???

- Who will be in charge of your audit?
  - Inside person or outside person?
  - Individual or committee?
- How will responsibility for the audit be assigned?
- Who creates goals by which you measure success?
- One time or ongoing audit?

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## Subjective Ethical Codes

- Favoring family and friends is a good thing.
- Make exceptions for people who are worthy.
- Gossip is protected speech.
- It won't hurt anyone if we...
- Staff and board deserve special rewards.
- People shouldn't "waste time" in the library.
- Respect is reserved for those who earn it.

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## Existing Formal Codes of Ethics

- The library profession, state and national
- The codes of the people and professions you serve
- Public sector ethics: State library law
- Institutional ethics: Universities, school districts
- Community ethics: local government

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## Ethical Standards are Distributed

Codes of ethics often are distributed  
in an organization's strategic plan  
–in its mission, vision, principles, and values–  
as well as in policies, employee handbooks,  
union and other employment contracts,  
and library board bylaws.

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## Homework

- What existing documents can you use to identify facets of a **distributed code of ethics**?
- What are the common threads? Themes and words?
- If staff and leadership came together to identify and prioritize issues inherent in those documents, what could you assemble as a temporary code?

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## No Exceptions

- Everyday ethics are about treating people equally.
- An ethics audit includes all stakeholder behaviors:
  - Governing board members
  - All employees: fulltime, part time, and volunteer
  - Friends, library foundations, and allied groups
  - Groups and individuals using the library's facilities
  - Community and institutional partners

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## Homework

1. Put together a list of stakeholders that would be impacted by a code of ethics
2. Hand the list to a group of library staff members and learn who you forgot to add.
3. Hand the list to a group of citizens and learn who you forgot to add.

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# Ethics Audit with Pat Wagner

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## Ethics Audit Checklist

• Four Library Standards	• Collections
• Principles, Policies, Procedures	• Services
• What People Say	• Programming
• Decisions and Actions	• Customer Service
• Library Leadership	• Online Access
• Personnel	• Special Issues

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## Four Library Standards

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## Principles, Policies, Procedures

- If it matters, write it down:  
Written agreements hold you accountable.  
Write them without library or legal jargon.  
Writing P/P/P is like writing law: The Legal Audit
- Governance:  
Who has input? Who makes decisions?  
Who provides feedback? Who evaluates success?

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## What People Say

Symptoms of potential ethical breaches:

- No one will know. No one will care. It's just this one time.
- *I trust they're telling the truth. We don't have time to check the facts.*
- Decide right now. We can't look indecisive. We're under pressure.
- *If we tell people, they're going to be upset. No need to worry them.*
- Don't let "them" speak at the meeting; will open a can of worms.
- *If they had cared, they would have said something by now.*
- The decision won't hurt me or anyone I know.
- *Let's hold the board meeting in a place where the public can't find us.*

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## Decisions and Actions

- Transparency breeds **trust and respect**.
  - Decisions communicated in timely fashion?
- Actions executed in a timely fashion?
- How are staff, customers, and the greater community invited to provide **input before decisions are made and feedback after actions are taken**?
- When do other people get to vote, not just have input?

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### Library Leadership

- Symptoms of elitism and privilege. Does everyone: Pay fines, pay for parking, pay for copies, wait for the popular books, use the public washroom, have equal status in order new materials, stand in line for the book sale, and held to standards of civility?
- Follows letter and spirit of FL state open meeting laws?

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### Personnel

- Do staff have the same rights to privacy as library customers regarding their use of the library?
- Does everyone have the opportunity to provide input and feedback regarding decisions?
- Are staff treated with civility?
- Are they required to treat each other with civility?

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### Collections

- Who has input and makes decisions regarding the purchase, display, and disposal of materials?
- How are resources allocated?
- How do the collections reflect the different communities and audiences the library serves?
- How does the collection reflect accessibility issues: language, disabilities, homelessness?
- What about children and teens? How do they have input?

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# Ethics Audit with Pat Wagner

## Services

- Do library services reflect the needs of an elite few, people who have nowhere else to turn, or the many?
- How are resources allocated?
- Are meeting room guidelines reasonable, balancing First Amendment rights versus practical constraints?
- Is the library evolving its services to meet the changing needs of changing demographics?
- Does the library have "secret services" for the inner circle?

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## Programming

- Who has input and makes decisions regarding programming?  
Are target audiences invited to recommend and decide?  
What about children, teens, seniors, New Americans?
- How are resources allocated?
- How does programming reflect the different communities and audiences the library serves?
- How does programming reflect accessibility issues:  
language, disabilities, transportation

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## Customer Service

- **Respect:** Treating people as if they are your social equals.
  - The Welcoming Library: Hello, good-bye, please, thank-you
  - Look up from work and smile.
- Use of library/professional jargon in signs and responses?
- Does the library have two levels of service?
  - One for people you know, like, look like you?
  - One for strangers, people you don't like or are different?

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# Ethics Audit with Pat Wagner

## Online Access

- What about the people without home online access, computers, or mobile devices?
- How easy is it to navigate online resources?
- How current is the information?
- What do you post? What don't you post? Why?
- How does the library promote technological literacy?

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## Special Issues

- **Emergencies:** Is it ethical to follow the rules?
- **Illegal activities:** Do you call the cops if it's director, trustee, elected official, volunteer, or employee bad behavior?
- **Gift and donation policies:** How are they implemented?
- Undocumented and/or homeless **library customers?**
- **Local practices** that might be deemed unethical?
- When quick decisions must be made. (Rare, but it happens.)
- **Public meetings: Flying worms!**

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## Typical Mistakes

- No established code in place before the audit.
- Only a few people know the ethical code.
- Punitive rather than educational responses
- No one knows the applicable laws.
- Unethical behavior tolerated among the elite
- No buy-in or support from supervisors or managers
- No plan for making things better

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## First Steps

- *What is the existing code of ethics for your library?*
- Do all your employees, including part-timers, pages, volunteers, and members of Friends, have a print copy?
- *Did everyone go through a training session that explains the code of ethics and answers questions?*
- Do your stakeholders know the code and how it applies to their roles in your library?

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## Resources

- [www.ethics.state.fl.us](http://www.ethics.state.fl.us)
- [www.ala.org/tools/ethics](http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics)
- ALA 1939 Code of Ethics for Librarians
- [rbms.info/standards/code\\_of\\_ethics/](http://rbms.info/standards/code_of_ethics/)
- [www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp)
- [floridaleagueofcities.com/resources/ethics-civility-resources](http://floridaleagueofcities.com/resources/ethics-civility-resources)

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