



A PLACE FOR ETHICS

Back in the time of the Cold War, when school children practiced “duck & cover”, Senator McCarthy saw pink, and Sputnik beeped overhead, the United States relied on a Distant Early Warning System, consisting of a series of radar installations in Northern Canada. Also known as the DEW Line, these installations were intended to give the U.S. advance warning of a missile attack from the Soviet Union. Check your geography, the North Pole was a shortcut from Siberia to any U.S. city.

Fortunately, we never had to “duck & cover”, and the Soviet Union will soon be a footnote in global history. However, the U.S. is now installing a missile defense system in Alaska, focused on North Korea. The enemy changes, but the risks continue.

WHY AM I MENTIONING THIS?

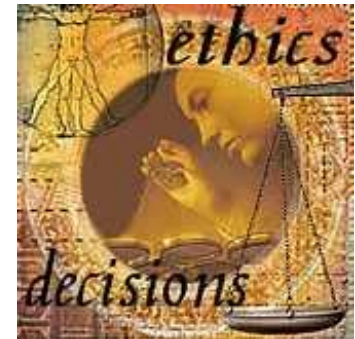
New York State has an Ethics Commission, charged with the impossible task of identifying potential conflicts of interest among State policy-makers and high elected or appointed officials. Some of you may have to go through the tedious and boring task of telling the Ethics Commission that you have no investments of value, no financial interests in businesses that seek State custom, no relatives on the payroll of agencies or businesses regulated by your own agency. If you are lucky enough to have a significant stock portfolio, you must fill out the lengthy details to satisfy the Commission that you are above suspicion, there is not even the slightest hint of impropriety, and that you subscribe to the noble (Civil War) sentiment of “Death before dishonor”.

As we try to avoid any hint of scandal, conflict of interest, impropriety, fraud, waste or mismanagement, we should look upon **ethics** not as a hindrance, but as a valuable ally. A first line of defense against civil litigation or criminal indictment.

This is not to badger you to be overly scrupulous. On April 14th, everyone in the public or private sector finds it necessary to make copies (we used to call them Xeroxes) of their tax returns.

And on occasion you probably brought in your own floppy disks when the office supply ran short – so taking home a low-bidder ballpoint is not likely to earn you a place in Dante Alighieri’s **Inferno**.

No, common sense is still an option. The old quote about “dipping your pen in company ink” is about more than social improprieties with staff. It is about abusing a position of trust.



Taking advantage of your employer – and the taxpayer, for personal gain, monetary enrichment, or securing special advantages for yourself or a favored group.

There is no guarantee that you will not be falsely accused of impropriety – character assassination is always in season. But you are more likely to lead an uneventful life if you set an ethical example – for yourself, your family, your staff, your agency, and your community. If you are really lucky, you will only need a lawyer to write your will. Choose a good one.

Ethics does not depend on a vengeful deity, or an altruistic spirit. It’s a simple equation. The more you stray from ethical behavior, the more likely you will face the consequences. Check out the 2005 award-winning film **Sideways**. It’s kind of an “odd couple” story – reminiscent also of Aesop’s Fable of the grasshopper and the ant. Then think back to your teenage years, when you were invulnerable. How many of your friends never made it to the NY State retirement age (55 in Tier One)? How many thought they could handle drugs or alcohol? How many thought their GTO would beat Amtrak to the grade crossing?

If you are going to steal, steal big, but practice ethical behavior until you find that million dollar opportunity. Keep your nose clean, and they will never suspect you, until you fly off to Brazil (first class, no less)!