RESPONDING TO FEEDBACK

ETHICS ISSUE QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Prepared November 2017

The Issue

Quick summary

- Receiving negative or surprising feedback can be difficult
- Such input confers an obligation to respond
- There are many ethical considerations in determining how best to do this

What are our obligations when we receive complaints or negative feedback about our work?

Evaluation is an important part of work, but can at times result in surprising or negative feedback.
For example:

- Receiving a particularly strenuous complaint from a patient, family member, or staff
- A meeting or presentation that triggers negative emotions for someone
- A group learning activity in a workshop that causes anxiety for someone who prefers to work alone
- Discovering a resource used in a project is attributed to someone with a little-known history of bigotry or misogyny.

It can be difficult to ensure that no one is harmed or triggered through our work. However, it should be acknowledged that offense constitutes a kind of harm, and our obligations to respond to the feedback will be shaped by a number of factors, including the nature of the complaint, the degree of harm or offense, and the ability to correct or mitigate its effects.

Responding to Feedback

Receiving harsh or surprising feedback can be shocking and cause feelings of defensiveness or even anger. It is important not to take it personally. It can be helpful to reframe the experience as a learning opportunity, and acknowledge and respond to the concerns of the individual providing the feedback in some constructive way.

There are a number of ethical considerations to explore in determining exactly what the response should entail.

Ethics Issue Quick Reference: Responding to Feedback

Ethical Considerations

Values: The values of the individual providing the feedback must be considered and acknowledged if possible (i.e. if the concern is not forwarded anonymously). The values of the organization must also be recognized. Consider whether the concern reflects an inconsistency with these stated values. Decisions made and actions performed by a representative of the organization should be compatible with the organization's values. While there will never be a universal consensus on which values take priority when there are incompatibilities, consideration should be given to how best to respect as many as possible.

Principles: Moral principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence and justice have bearing on ethical decision making in terms of what to do when one receives difficult or negative feedback. We generally want to do good and prevent or avoid harm. We want to behave fairly and equitably. It will be important to consider how best to promote good and minimize or reduce potential harms. It is also critical to acknowledge principles of social justice, and to recognize that harms can come from microaggressions and other activities that perpetuate structural disadvantage.

Duties and obligations: Consider the intention behind the object of concern. Rarely is there intent to offend or cause harm, but when it happens, there is a duty to prevent further negative outcomes, if at all possible. There may be laws or policies that must be followed, for example, against hate speech, or promoting an accessible or inclusive environment. Clear violations of social norms, even if inadvertent, will increase obligations to mitigate harms. It will be helpful to review materials periodically to ensure that there is no previously unknown reason to believe they would violate such norms.

Consequences and outcomes: It could be the case that an individual was being deliberately provocative in order to generate discussion or learning. Harms and benefits must be balanced so that learning is not done at the expense of trust. Consider the nature of the concern. It may be the case that something provocative or controversial can be used for education; on the other hand, offense may prevent learning. When determining an appropriate response to feedback, a number of factors may be relevant, including the severity of the harm (e.g. number of people affected, degree of harm to each), and financial and reputational costs (e.g. no cost to replacing a controversial image or quote in a presentation, but major cost to re-print a large number of documents). High level vetting of sources can be helpful as well.

Relationships: An essential ethical consideration in responding to feedback is the relationship between the person providing feedback and the individual/organization receiving it. When harm, offense, or concern is expressed, it may be due to an actual or potential breach of trust. As an organization, and as employees of the organization, we have an obligation to demonstrate respect and caring. Part of this will be addressing any harm that has occurred, and taking steps to ensure it does not happen again. This will involve understanding the context from which the feedback has come (e.g. has it come from a concern about cultural or personal safety? From a perception that the organization's values or principles have been compromised?). This will help determine an appropriate response.

Feedback reflects the individual's values and draws attention to how materials and events reflect or conflict with the organization's values.

Ethics Issue Quick Reference: Responding to Feedback

Questions for Discussion and Consideration

- **Values:**
    - What values are being expressed by the person providing the feedback?
    - How do these values match or conflict with the object of concern?
    - How do they match or conflict with the WRHA's stated values?
    - How are your own personal and professional values affecting your response to the feedback?
- **Principles:**
    - What will do the most good?
    - What will do the least harm?
    - What will prevent or mitigate further harm?
    - What would be the most fair?
    - Are there elements of social justice that need to be considered?
- **Duties and obligations:**
    - What were the intentions in the situation?
    - Were these intentions received as expected?
    - Are there clear violations of social norms?
    - Are there laws or policies to consider?
    - Does the situation raise opportunities for discussion and education?
- **Consequences and outcomes:**
    - What is the nature of the concern?
    - How severe is it?
    - How many people are affected and to what degree?
    - What reputational and financial risks need to be considered?
    - Logistically, how difficult is it to repair or mitigate the situation?
- **Relationships:**
    - What is the context from which this concern was raised?
    - Are there equity or cultural safety elements?
    - What type of response will demonstrate caring and respect?
    - How can trust best be preserved or restored?

Resources

WRHA Ethics Decision Making Guides: http://www.wrha.mb.ca/about/ethics/
   framework.php

Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action: http://www.trc.ca/websites/
   trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

For more information on any of the points in this document, please contact us, or talk with your library about the resources on this list.

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority
Office régional de la santé de Winnipeg

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