

An Olive Branch

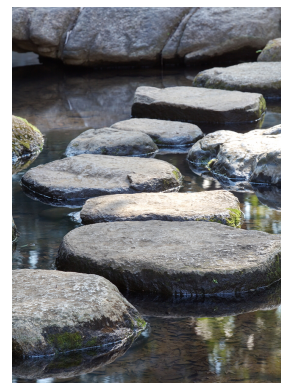
-a project of the Zen Center of Pittsburgh

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This newsletter is intended for teachers, leaders, and practitioners of all Buddhist traditions. While *An Olive Branch* is a project of the Zen Center of Pittsburgh, people from other Buddhist traditions and secular organizations have turned to us for help with conflict, ethics, misconduct, and governance training.

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Safer Sanghas, Part Three

This issue of our newsletter continues the theme of "safer sanghas," introduced in the August issue. In August, we focused on the importance of strong bylaws; in September, we wrote about the significance of clear policies, concentrating particularly on policies related to individual safety and ethics. Now we turn our attention to procedures -- specifically grievance procedures.

Policies: Why and What

Remember that *policies* are rules developed and adopted by an organization to guide major decisions. Organizations of all sizes need policies to prevent inconsistent and haphazard decision-making. Without policies, whoever has the most power can call the shots on practically everything.

POLICY

Organizations should have policies about ethics, conflict of interest, whistleblower, accountability, the role of the board and chief executive/head priest, finance, investments, fundraising, personnel, communications, etc.

But policies need procedures to bring them to life - to make them enforceable - so now we turn our attention to grievance procedures. *Procedures* are the specific methods used to enact policies.

Grievance Procedure Defined

A *grievance* is a claim by an individual in the organization that a policy was misinterpreted or misapplied by another person or persons or by the organization itself resulting in some type of harm to that individual.

A *grievance procedure* is a method for resolving internal disputes and addressing complaints. The procedure may have informal as well as formal elements. An effective procedure provides people with a mechanism to resolve issues of concern and helps sanghas correct issues before they become destructive to the community or result in litigation.

Create a Grievance Procedure Proactively

Leaders should anticipate the probability that conflicts will occur within their organization and create an ethics policy and grievance procedure proactively. With a clear policy and solid procedure in place, the inevitable tensions created by a conflict will be less likely to destroy relationships or the community.

Many conflicts can be resolved quickly by correcting a misunderstanding or with a simple mediation. A grievance procedure usually saves time, money, and the relationship between the parties. And handling the issue with those immediately involved is a benefit because they know more about the problem at hand than do people at higher levels.



Elements of a Grievance Procedure



Usually a grievance procedure includes the concept of a progression of steps or levels at which a complaint is handled. Typically the first step provides for rapid and informal action to handle a complaint by those immediately involved, with successively higher or more formal levels if the lower-level resolution does not work.

It is important that the procedure allows the grievance to move forward in a manner that doesn't require the injured party to meet with the person who caused harm if s/he believes it is not a safe environment.

For example, if a person is reporting a colleague or supervisor who uses abusive language, s/he should be permitted to move to another step in the procedure that would not put her/him in danger of being yelled at another time without a third party present.

Another key concept in grievance procedures is the availability of an alternative if several attempts at resolution have failed. In the event that the parties have discussed the matter at all internal levels and are still deadlocked, mediation by an outside, third-party like *An Olive Branch* is usually called for.

Other elements in most grievance procedures include time limits (so that no one can stall the

process indefinitely) and a requirement that complaints be submitted in writing.

Worth Reading

A new publication from Deloitte, written for the for-profit corporate audience, is worth reading for those truly interested in ethics. The title is ***Tone at the top: The first ingredient in a world-class ethics and compliance program.***

[click here to read *Tone at the top* from Deloitte](#)

The article asserts that, "In the context of an ethics and compliance program, the tone at the top sets an organization's guiding values and ethical climate... Ultimately it is the glue that holds an organization together."



Further, it warns that "Without question, reputation risks today are at least as great as strategic, operating, and financial risks. Sometimes, all it takes is a rumor or hint of impropriety or malfeasance, or a social media post 'gone viral,' to negatively impact shareholder value and damage, or worse, destroy, corporate and brand reputations in an instant."

Who is "at the top" in your sangha? Certainly the board and the head priest; perhaps others as well. Reading and discussing this article together would be worthwhile.

An Olive Branch strengthens organizations by helping leaders understand the role of conflict in organizational health.

- *To proactively address conflict, we offer dispute resolution training and help organizations design ethical governance procedures.*
- *To respond in the midst of disruptive conflict, we provide processes for healing and restoring harmony.*

An Olive Branch brings the calming influence of a neutral third party, inspired by the tradition of Buddhist teaching that stretches over 2500 years.

More information: [here](#)

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