

CEP Magazine – May 2023



Michael Thomann
(michael.thomann@lmco.com) is an Ethics Senior Manager at Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company, in Stratford, Connecticut, USA. Michael is also an adjunct professor at Fordham University Law School in the Program on Corporate Ethics and Compliance.



Andy Whittemore
(andy.whittemore@lmco.com) is an Ethics Senior Manager at Lockheed Martin Corporation in Owego, New York, USA.

Conducting investigations with external business partners

By Michael Thomann and Andy Whittemore

Ethics and compliance professionals may sometimes be required to conduct an investigation involving an external partner. These partners might include a customer, supplier, contract house, governmental agency, and others. We'll explore some unique aspects of these investigations to consider while you are planning, conducting, and reporting on your work.

Relationships

Ethics and compliance professionals typically have open access to all employees and most areas within their business or organization. Building relationships when something isn't going wrong can demonstrate your value as an adviser and may pay dividends down the road when internal or external cooperation is necessary. One of the main elements to being effective in enlisting support is understanding your organizational structure and who does what. Ethics and compliance professionals should understand who the key forward-facing people are in their organization. Who are the chief business development or program management people dealing with major customers regularly? Who are the supply chain points of contact who maintain relationships with main suppliers? Is there an individual or group responsible for community engagement?

Understanding the answers to these questions can be critical in a crisis situation where working with an external partner is necessary. A few examples of when these relationships become important include when an employee within your organization is alleged to have committed misconduct at a customer or supplier facility, when a third-party employee has committed misconduct against one of your employees or in your facility, or perhaps if there is an emergency in your facility where outside personnel such as paramedics or police are called in.

Establishing those relationships takes time and must be intentional. Proactively leverage those essential individuals in your organization and discuss the challenges they face when dealing with third parties. Request introductions through previously scheduled status meetings or "meet and greets" while a third party is visiting your facility. Another great example of community partnering is inviting local officials, including fire, police, and emergency personnel, for a tour of your facility. Let them get a good understanding of how your facility is laid out and a general idea of how and where employees work. If there is an accident in your facility, calling in professionals who have knowledge of your facilities might save crucial time in providing emergency services.

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