

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLASW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLASW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Collegial Conflicts & Social Media Challenges

Human relationships, while essential to our social fabric, are not always easy. There will be conflicts, disagreements, and personality clashes. Social workers are not immune and may experience these conflicts in the workplace with colleagues, managers, and supervisors. These issues are usually resolved through open dialogue and conflict resolution. However, social media is having an impact on how we vent and communicate about workplace issues. Venting that once took place with a trusted colleague in the silo of one's office, is now happening online. This edition of the Ethical Compass will provide an ethical framework for exploring collegial conflicts within the realm of social media and outline areas for consideration and critical thought.

Values, Guidelines and Standards

Social work practice in NL is guided by the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice. The following values, guidelines and standards are important.

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics:

“Social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights” (p.4).

CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice:

“Social workers relate to both social work colleagues and colleagues from other disciplines with respect, integrity and courtesy and seek to understand differences in viewpoints and practice” (p. 13).

“Social workers remain open to constructive comment on their practice or behavior. Social workers base criticism of colleagues' practice or behavior on defensible arguments and concern, and deal with differences in ways that uphold the principles of the *Code of Ethics*, the *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* and the honour of the social work profession” (p. 14).

NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice:

“Social workers do not engage in activities or behaviors that diminish public trust in social workers or the social work profession” (p. 17)

“Social workers must be cognizant of what personal information can be accessed about them in a public domain, including social networking sites, and how this information may possibly affect their professional practice and the social work profession” (p.17).

Permanency of Online Communication

Information posted online does not have an expiry date and can be accessed by others even when privacy settings are set to the highest level. Information can be screened, shared, and forwarded beyond the intended audience. Therefore, social workers are encouraged to practice caution in terms of what information is posted on social networking platforms and critically think about the information they post and how it might be perceived and interpreted. Pause before posting is a great strategy that encourages users to consider the consequences before posting on any social media platform. The following reflective questions are also important when considering whether to grieve collegial conflicts online.

Questions for Reflection

- 1) What is my intent for posting about any issues I have with a colleague online? Will it help resolve an issue or situation? Am I reacting in the heat of the moment?
- 2) What are the risks of airing collegial conflict through social networking sites?
- 3) Am I prepared for any negative backlash that may stem from my post?
- 4) Am I breaching a standard or organizational policy?
- 5) Am I compromising the integrity of my employing organization, my colleague, or the social work profession?
- 6) How might this impact my work with colleagues?
- 7) Are there legal considerations? Could my actions be considered defamation of character?
- 8) Are there other channels that I can utilize for assistance in resolving the conflict?

This edition of the Ethical Compass explored some of the ethical considerations of venting about collegial conflicts and disagreements on social networking sites. Given the issues raised and the important values, guidelines and standards highlighted, the airing of collegial conflict through social media would not be advisable and it is important that social workers think through the ethical complexities, engage in critical reflection, consult with colleagues and review one's ethical responsibilities and obligations prior to posting any negative comment about a colleague online.

References:

- CASW. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- CASW. (2005). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- NLASW. (2018). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. Johns, NL: Author.