



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

January 2026 Episode

MLM Mentor

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government.

So with the holiday hustle and bustle behind us, it would be tempting to claim there is nothing going on this time of year, right? It's so boring! It's gray weather! There's nothing to do! The truth is, there's a lot happening, right?

Everyone is hard at work tackling their New Year's resolutions. For you is it hitting the gym more? Is it reading more, instead of, you know, mindless phone scrolling? And of course, there's college basketball, NFL teams getting narrowed down before all the big Super Bowl and March Madness and everything, oh, and yes, let's not forget the biggest one of all - the holiday shopping bills are arriving in the mail. Yay! Right? All right. For those of you frugal Freddys and financially wise Fionas out there you might not be able to relate to stories about people trying to earn extra money to pay off those holiday bills, but I still think you will find this week's episode enlightening and hopefully, maybe even entertaining, because this week's stories takes us to the world of - drumroll, please - \*drumroll sound effect\* multi-level marketing.

Yes, multi-level marketing, also known as the MLM world, is a business model where independent distributors sell products or services directly to consumers. So they earn commissions on their own sales, the sales of other people that they recruit and they form what's called a downline.

These company's products can range from, oh, I don't know, anti-aging serums and makeup and cookware, supplements, even cleaning products. There's a million of them out there. And the more a person sells and the more people they recruit to sell the products, the more they earn.

Sometimes it's as simple as someone wanting a discount on their favorite jewelry, so they join the MLM. Other times, maybe they're looking for a community of friends. Sometimes, though, the MLM reps can get a little aggressive with their sales pitches and sometimes it actually crosses the line into a violation of the Ohio Ethics Law.

"How could that happen?" you ask? Well, pull up your office chair, pour yourself a hot chocolate on this cold winter day, and let's talk.

Our first story takes us to a county office where a county commission employee of a certain commission, I'm not, I'll allow it to remain anonymous, if you don't mind, decided to become involved in an MLM. Granted, that's her prerogative, as long as it's confined her own time, her own home, her own equipment, resources, etc. - but no, that scenario wouldn't exactly make it to this podcast, would it?

Instead, this county employee took full advantage of the time, resources, and influence of her government job to try to build her outside MLM business. She used her government issued laptop and her government issued email address to email her coworkers and her subordinates about her business, encouraging them to buy her products. Then they would actually use that email exchange to buy products and they would communicate back and forth.

She would also encourage them to become one of her down lines who would sell the products so she could receive ongoing commissions on their sales as well as her own. She would bring in samples for others in the office to try and from what we're told, assertively solicited sales of these products, particularly from employees who were subordinate to her at work.

We were also told that she routinely, on public time, provided the email address and website for the MLM with which she was affiliated, and would encourage people to review the products and the company. And if that weren't enough - I think that would be enough! - but the story gets even better...or worse, depending on your point of view.

A few months ago, I used the verb "encouraged" to describe her approach for trying to persuade the employees who reported to her to make a purchase become sales consultants under her, etc.. The employees with whom we spoke had a few different verbs other than encourage, like pressured.

In fact, a few folks stated that the pressure to purchase products from her or join her MLM was quote, "high" and that those in the office who did not buy products from her felt they were not treated as well as those who did. One employee even reported a closed door conversation, reiterating that feeling of being aggressively pressured to buy products or sign up with the company, which then created an awkward working environment.

Apparently, it got so bad that the county commission board members received an anonymous letter complaining about this supervisor's tactics. They did advise her to stop all MLM activity, which she did, but not before she earned nearly \$12,000 in commissions.

I think this story is a great example of how the Ethics Law is a protection to the greater public, certainly, but even to us in the privacy of our own offices. Nobody should have to come to work in a government office and be pressured into helping their own boss get commissions and sales in an outside, unrelated business, especially when they feel potential retaliation is on the line if they decline.

So in as much as I wanted to believe, this had to be an isolated case my jaw dropped recently during a recent conversation I had with my own boss, Paul Nick, the Executive Director of the Ohio Ethics Commission. I had mentioned to him that I was working on this particular episode of the podcast, and to my shock, he said the same thing happened to him earlier in his life and career! And I was like, "WHAT?" So you know I couldn't let that one go. So I bring to you for the first time on the Voice of Ethics, my boss, Paul Nick. Hey, Paul.

Paul: Hey, Susan.

Susan: Thank you for coming on the podcast.

Paul: Oh, my pleasure.

Susan: You knew I wasn't going to let you hide forever from being on this podcast.

Paul: I tried. \*laugh\*

Susan: I know, you did! You did an admirable job so far. So, Paul, multi-level marketing, I cannot believe this happened to you. Would you mind just tell us a little bit about your experience and your story with this?

Paul: Sure, sure. When I was in college, I was interning part time at a government agency, and I got to know my direct supervisor pretty well, and he provided me some really, really good career advice early on in my career. He was a mentor. Because I was a part time employee I was struggling with bills, and we

talked about that. One day he brought up an opportunity that he wanted me to think about. So he gave me a cassette tape to listen to - yes, I'm that old - and about halfway through listening to it, it became very clear to me that he was trying to recruit me into a multi-level marketing company that he worked with.

Susan: Oh my word. Okay. And bonus points for anybody out there who knows what to do with a pencil and a cassette tape when things go awry, right?

Paul: Indeed

Susan: We'll send you a prize okay. Yeah. Go ahead, Paul, okay.

Paul: Anyway, so I don't think that he was intending anything bad or anything other than to give me an opportunity to earn some money but I felt very conflicted because he was my direct supervisor. He was giving me reviews and potential career advancement, and I kind of felt pressured into signing up with this company to sell their products.

Susan: What were some of the things that he said or did, even if it wasn't nefarious in intent? What was some of the like little pressure tactics or things - was it emails? Was it "Hey, this could do a lot for your career." What were some of the examples?

Paul: Oh, this was before the days of email, Susan.

Susan: Oh, wow! We are dating ourselves Paul! Yeah, exactly!

Paul: I didn't even have a computer to use.

Susan: Right, right.

Paul: But no, it was very subtle. He was very vague about the name of the company and it really was just little things like, "Oh, you know, if you're looking for ways to make some money, here's a potential opportunity for you."

Susan: He put post-it notes on your electric typewriter, right?

Paul: Essentially, essentially.

Susan: Well, I'm just curious, did any of your fellow interns actually join up? Were there ever conversations? What was kind of the general feel or tenor of the office?

Paul: I think there were only a couple of us who were working at the time and I was the only one that he approached to my knowledge. And, I don't think anybody else did sign up with him.

Susan: Did you feel like, because you chose not to sign up, that there were any detrimental consequences to your career?

Paul: I feared that there might be. I'd only been a couple months at it, but as it turns out, I ended up making an excuse. I said I'm not very good at sales and thanked him for thinking about me and kind of took that tact. And, I don't think my turning him down had any effect, at all, ultimately.

Susan: So normally on the podcast, we don't give tons of legal advice, but A) I have the Executive Director of the Ethics Commission here who happens to be an accomplished attorney. So Paul, just without, you don't have to quote the statute, but seriously, we talk on this podcast about why these things betray the public's trust. But first, could you talk about what's illegal about this, essentially, what it comes down to.

Paul: Well, what it comes down to is that you've got a supervisor who has the ability to affect the career of their subordinate, asking them for a thing of value that benefits themselves. And that puts him in a conflicting situation. It makes, them a business associate, as we would use, in the Ethics Laws. And when you're business associates, it's very hard for you to be objective. You know, if I'm trying to make a sales goal, for example, my supervisor might recommend a raise for me. Might recommend full time employment. It might adversely affect the objectivity of their decision making, because it's reliant upon this financial connection that we have, and that could impact and influence them to be not as objective as they really should be.

Susan: And more broadly, why is it, I could understand someone arguing "This was one person and one intern. What's the big deal?" What's the big deal more broadly, foundationally, for the Ethics Law?

Paul: Well, really the big deal is that again, it's not, it's a conflict of interest. It's somebody acting upon personal interests that involve public monies and public dollars.

Susan: And what does that mean for the public's trust, I guess?

Paul: Well, it makes them wonder whether or not I was being advanced in my career in this agency because of my skills and talent, or because of my financial connection with my supervisor.

Susan: And I have to ask you, just because of your background. Actually, tell us a little bit about your background even before you got to the Ethics Commission, because I think people are going to be interested to know what your background is of "dealing with the bad guys," so to speak.

Paul: Well, when I got out of law school, I ended up as my first job working at the city prosecutor's office. So I worked in the courts in and out, dealing with, misdemeanor violations of the Ohio Revised Code.

Susan: And so the reason, then when you come to the Ethics Commission, you were investigations for a long time before you were the Executive Director, right?

Paul: Yeah. I was hired from city attorney's office as the Chief of Investigations for the Ethics Commission. And then I became the Chief Investigative Attorney. And that was about 15 years before I became the director.

Susan: So my point of kind of making Paul reveal his impressive CV to all of us is that Paul has a lot of experience in dealing with, quote unquote, bad guys, right? People make bad decisions. But that's why I want to put you on the spot a little bit, Paul, and say - people who make bad decisions aren't always bad people who woke up that morning wanting to do evil kind of thing. So talk a little more about that.

Paul: Oh absolutely not. I, I think that most people don't get up in the morning saying, "You know, I'm going to commit a crime today." I think that, that, I think we all recognize that. And we've seen that. I've seen that over my 30 plus years here at the Ohio Ethics Commission. I don't believe that most people intend to violate the law. They, if anything else, they measure themselves by their intentions to be helpful, not seeing the objective problems with these conflicts of interest that can be very real.

Susan: So like this supervisor you had, it would be safe to say if somebody had approached him at that time in his life and said, "Hey, sir, this is a violation of the Ethics Law." He very well might have been startled and would never have dreamed that he was breaking the law by encouraging his interns to join his MLM.

Paul: Oh yeah, I think so, absolutely. I believe that this person is definitely well intended. Just was, had an opportunity that they thought might be helpful and, but it did have an impact. I mean, it actually made me think and think hard about whether I should or should not get involved. And it created a conflict.

Susan: So, Paul, since I've got you, I just have to ask one more time.

Paul: Yeah.

Susan: The Ohio Ethics or the Ohio Ethics Commission, if if people were going to take away one message from my boss at this agency, what would it be?

Paul: I would say, go with your gut. And if you're asking a question about an action that you're going to take, that pretty much answers your question. That a lot of, most times that your gut takes you in the right direction, that the Law makes sense, and what you think the Law should be is what it is.

Susan: I always think to myself, sometimes we have two voices in our head. The first one is usually the one telling you the truth, the one that says, "Hmm, maybe I should stop." And then there's this voice that says, "Ah, it'll be fine!" So, is it fair to say we should listen to that first voice or the gut feeling that we have the first time?

Paul: Absolutely. I really think that you're, the first voice, your first impressions, your first thoughts or hesitations. Like in this instance here, when I was asked this question, it didn't feel right. And that guided me to the right choice.

Susan: Yeah. Well, Paul, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. You guys, I've worked with Paul for 20 years. I can tell you he's a busy guy. So I'm very grateful that he joined us. And who knows what other fun stories that he's been hiding from me all these years, that we'll pull him out for a future podcast. So thank you, Paul, for being here.

Paul: No, thank you, Susan. Thank you for doing this.

Susan: And that is our show today. I hope you enjoyed it. A huge thank you to Paul Nick, our Executive Director, for joining me today. And an even bigger thank you to Ohio Ethics Commission tech wizard Nick Rohrbaugh for all the behind the scenes producing, editing and general wizardry that he does for this podcast.

Please be sure to join us again in two weeks when we will take a look at some New Year's resolutions that went awry about two months into the New Year. Until then, be sure to check out our show notes, which highlights one of my all-time favorite advisory opinions about government service and outside jobs. And don't forget - if your boss is harassing you to join his or her MLM team or buy their products, please let us know!

While we're on the topic of bosses, let's end this podcast with this question. Do you know what the title is of the person who is head of old MacDonald's farm? The C-I-E-I-O, of course! Yeah. \*sheep bleating sound effect\* Take care everyone. Be ethical. Bye.