



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

February 2026 Episode

Discussing Discouraging Discounts: Good Deals Gone Bad

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.

Today is February 3rd, 2026, and this is a very special day for me and my family. My sweet Dad, who passed away in 2019, was born on this day in 1925. Today would have been his 101st birthday and believe me, if he were still here with us, you would have heard about it.

My dad loved to celebrate not just his birthday, but to tell everyone his age. He was so proud of being a senior citizen. Not to mention a decorated World War II veteran. I kid you not, my dad told everyone how old he was - with a huge smile, no less.

It could literally be, let's say, the week after his 94th birthday and he would be telling people, "I'm almost 95." He was really, really a funny guy, and I suspect where I may have gotten my goofy sense of humor from and my love of really bad jokes.

So to celebrate my dad today, I am going to have a scoop of his most favorite ice cream flavor later today, butter pecan. Now, that's not my favorite flavor and truthfully, I don't usually eat ice cream except in the heat of summer. But I make an exception every February 3rd to celebrate my dad and to remember his life. If you have a cherished way that you remember ethical people in your life, drop me a line and tell me about it. You can find my email in the show notes and I'd love to hear how you celebrate the memory of someone who helped shape you into a person of integrity.

But in addition to this week being my dad's birthday week, it's also the week that on average, 8% of Americans begin to abandon their New Year's resolutions. Bummer. Or so soon or perhaps I should say DISCouraging. Have you ever noticed how many words that relate to the world of ethics? Begin with those letters DISC.

For example. Let's DISCover new ways to comply with the ethics law. Let's make sure we DISCard any unethical behaviors. After all, ethics violations are a real DISConnect with the public's trust. And please make sure you DISClose and recuse on any potential conflicts of interest. After we finish this podcast, let's turn on some DISCo music. *disco music plays* Okay. See? There's tons of them.

Oh, and I have one more. Can I take that DISCount? *record scratch sound effect, disco music tops* Wait, what? What do discounts have to do with the ethics law? Plenty. Let's discuss some more.

So I mentioned that historically, this is the week that some people begin to let go of the promises they made to themselves on January 2nd or third. So don't be a statistic. Keep it up. I believe in you. But let's say that you're determined to see your resolution through to its completion

And now let's say that your resolution was to finally finish your home remodeling, renovation, refresh your project, whatever. And to get that job done this year. You're going to need some paint. And heck, if we can get our hands on a nice discount to buy that paint for our houses, that's just icing on the cake, right? Unless, of course, your resolution was to eat less cake. So maybe then it's the blueberries on your oatmeal. I don't know.

Anyway, so what happens when you take a state employee who wants to paint his house with a state agency discount for paint with a vendor? To answer that question, I would like to introduce you to the Ohio Ethics Commission's Deputy Director and chief investigative attorney, Jed Hood. He'll tell the story, and then I'll be back to talk more about discounts and the ethics law. Take it away, Jed.

Jed: So we had a state employee who was building a new house for his family, and because of his job, part of his function was in the facilities he would acquire paint from a paint retailer near the facility that he operated. And he knew because of that that they offered the state a discount. And he had heard that if a state employee were going to ask for the same discount, they would apply and they would offer the discount to the employee, even for private purchase.

So the employee reached out to the supplier and asked for the discount. And the supplier actually said, yeah, we'll give you the discount. You work for the state, but you have to be the sales tax. So it's nice to collect the sales tax for the private purchase. Ultimately, the employee purchased the paid for his new construction, his house. It was a relatively low amount, but it was a discount in the hundreds of dollars by thousands.

The commission became aware of the allegation that he asked for and received this discount. We investigated, the employee admitted to it, accepting the discount. I think he actually provided some receipts to substantiate the claims of the amounts. And unfortunately for him, he had to resign from his management position.

He was demoted because of this occurrence, and the commission entered into a public settlement agreement with him. Because of the demotion and his work in the relatively low amounts. But there was no question there was a conflict of interest for him to solicit, but also accepts that thing of value from someone who he was doing business with as a state employee. And they were doing this mistake. You just can't do that.

The other thing that's very important about this is that the paint retailer who offered in and gave the discounts to the employee could have committed a 102.03(F) violation because that that goes beyond just the public employee, the public official sphere, and goes to any person, no person is allowed to offer or give a thing of value to other employers. Public official in kind of in furtherance of their relationship at work.

So, you know, the idea is that they're not to give something of value to influence the decision making a public official or a public. And there could have been an allegation that that occurred in this instance. During our investigation, we actually found out that the retail was kind of a home office, didn't know that they were offering this discount to the employees separately and individually, and they put it into it fairly quickly themselves.

Susan: Did Jed do a good job painting you a picture of an ethics violation? I thought so too. If part of your public service is negotiating or authorizing vendors contracts. No, don't accept discounts the vendor offers for your own use. If you're not negotiating those contracts and a company offers a modest uniform discount to a large class of public officials and employees, yes, that would be okay. But again, it must be a modest discount and it must be offered to everyone in a particular class or governmental jurisdiction.

So, for example, if a local hardware store that sells goods to a city offers a modest discount to anyone who can show a city badge, that's not illegal, but discounts cannot be offered on a selective basis to specific employees just because that company has business or regulatory dealings with that agency. If you want more information on discounts and the ethics law, please check out our show notes, where we've included links to relevant fact sheets and advisory opinions.

That's our show for this week, everyone. Thank you for joining me. And please come back in two weeks. When will tackle the day of love, Valentine's Day. Maybe we'll talk chocolate. Maybe we'll talk engagement rings. You'll find out then.

And in keeping with the theme of love for that episode, I'll be introducing the "True North Award."

The True North Award is a verbal recognition of people who demonstrate the best in ethics and integrity. Full disclosure, most of our work at the Ethics Commission relates to those in public service, but in this podcast, we will occasionally acknowledge people from all walks of life who have gone above and beyond in simply being a quality human being.

In fact, our inaugural True North Award will be bestowed in our next episode to a high school senior from right here in our own beloved Buckeye state. You won't want to miss it!

In the meantime, I leave you with this poser. What happened when a ship carrying red paint collided with a ship carrying blue paint? Both crews were marooned. I know you're cringing, but you got to know. My dad would be so proud. Take care everyone. Be ethical. Bye.