

# Assessing Your Ethical Performance

BY BOB SHOEMAKE



Are all members of the Association of Fundraising Professionals ethically equal? Everyone who belongs to AFP must sign and abide by the *AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards*, but does that mean that every member's ethical performance is identical? Now you can assess not only your own ethical performance but also that of your organization, and then compare them with those of your AFP peers.

This summer AFP launched the AFP Ethics Assessment Inventory™, a research-based ethics assessment tool for you and your organization. This new member benefit, which is strictly voluntary and available online, was developed on the assumption that the best ethical decisions are made when there is alignment among the individual moral compass of fundraising professionals, the principles and standards of the profession as a whole and the values of the organization where fundraising professionals work. Usually there are gaps in at least some of these categories, and that is why the EAI is a developmental tool.

Why develop such an ethical assessment tool? What is the need? One reason is to have fundraisers asking important questions about ethics that affect them, their organizations and the profession—before an ethical dilemma actually occurs.

“I have the privilege of teaching ethics and, in my role as chair of the AFP Ethics Committee, to confer with many fellow fundraising professionals about the ethical dilemmas they face in their work,” says Paul Pribbenow, Ph.D., CFRE, president of Augsburg College in Minneapolis. “Often, however, my conclusion is that when we get to an ethical dilemma—whether it concerns donor intent, so-called ‘tainted money’ or conflicts of interest—it is often too late for the sorts of conversations we should be having all the time about the values we espouse as professionals and organizations, the ways those values might support or come into conflict with our behavior and how we might work together to live up to our highest values and commitments.”

Audrey P. Kintzi, ACFRE, executive vice president, National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Minnesota Chapter in Minneapolis, agrees. “I truly believe the best time to have a conversation about ethics is when there is nothing at stake—when no big ethical dilemma is before us or when a staff member hasn’t erred on behalf of our organization,” she says. “Ethics conversations should be a part of everyday life in a development office, yet they are often overlooked until it is too late.”

As a member of the EAI review panel, Kintzi remembers being overwhelmed by the tremendous response from the membership to the survey (see sidebar on page 18). “We asked what the characteristics are of a good/ethical leader, and we received thousands of answers—kind, fair, trustworthy, courageous, etc. Members were clear what they were looking for in a leader,” she says. “From their comments it also was clear that some of them may not be experiencing that kind of leadership in their current workplace. The responses both in number and in content made

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me even more committed to the project. Clearly there is a need to help all of us build a stronger moral compass.”

## What Is Assessed?

The AFP Ethics Assessment Inventory focuses on six characteristics of ethical practice for professional fundraisers and their organizations:

**1. Accountable.** As an AFP professional fundraiser with multiple accountabilities, you accept responsibility for your actions. This includes making sure that funds are used effectively, efficiently, and for the purpose for which they are given. You take care to honor donor intent and represent the donor’s best interest. You make decisions and recommendations for giving that are in your organization’s best interest. You provide conscientious oversight of the organization’s financial records.

**2. Adherent/observant.** As an AFP professional fundraiser it is your duty to act according to the highest standards of the profession and to adhere to and advocate for the AFP *Code of Ethical Principles and Standards of Professional Practice*. You accept responsibility to avoid the appearance of any unethical behavior. You must understand and follow all applicable laws that pertain to your profession. You must keep current with the best practices of the fundraising profession.

**3. Courageous.** As an AFP professional fundraiser, you believe it is your responsibility to constantly adhere to the highest standards of performance and not compromise those standards under pressure. You are not afraid to identify something as unethical. You stand up for what is right, even when it is not popular. You are willing to tell a donor “no” when a gift is not consistent with the organization’s mission. You believe that ethical behavior extends beyond the job and act accordingly in your private life.

**4. Integrity.** As an AFP professional fundraiser, you convey authenticity and

honesty in all personal and professional interactions. You are above reproach and do not stretch ethical boundaries. You are accountable for mistakes made and take appropriate measures to correct them.

**5. Transparent.** As an AFP professional fundraiser, you make all your processes, procedures and communications as clear and open as possible. You disclose all pertinent information and ensure it is reported accurately. You respect the wishes of donors, providing accurate answers to questions about your organization.

**6. Trustworthy (sincere).** As an AFP professional fundraiser, you exhibit conscientious and thoughtful leadership. You are sincere in your actions. You say what you are going to do and do what you say. Information, conversation and decisions are maintained confidentially. You treat all people with courtesy and respect.

## How the EAI Works

The AFP Ethics Assessment Inventory™ provides a snapshot, based on your self-evaluation of your ethical performance at this moment in time. This assessment is a developmental tool, not a test that you can pass or fail. It is intended to aid in the lifelong process of improving your ethical performance as a fundraising practitioner.

### 1. Your individual results

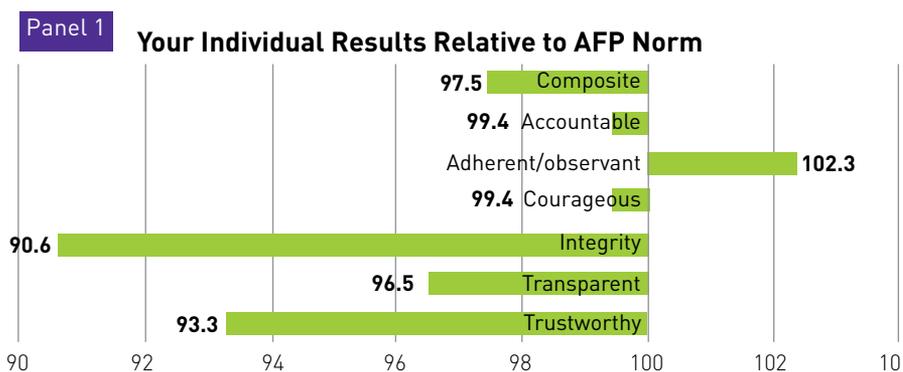
As shown in Panel 1 (below), the inven-

tory is designed to point out areas of strength and areas in which you may want to grow in your ethical practice—based on your evaluation of your performance.

The benchmark for each score in this panel (the number 100 on the graph) represents the average score of fellow AFP practitioners who have completed this assessment—the norm to which you are compared based on your AFP peers’ responses. A score above the mean would suggest an area of strength as compared with your AFP peers; a score below the mean would suggest an area in which there is an opportunity for growth compared with other members of AFP.

The first bar of this panel, “Composite,” compares your composite score with the composite score of AFP members who have completed this assessment.

The second through last bars—“Accountable,” “Adherent/Observant,” “Courageous,” “Integrity,” “Transparent” and “Trustworthy”—compare your score with the AFP benchmark score along each of the six dimensions. Again, the number 100 in each category is the benchmark based on AFP members who have completed this assessment. For example, if your composite results are 96, your results are four points below the mean compared with your AFP peers. If your results for the category “Courageous” are 102, your results place you two points above the mean score.



**2. Your organization’s results**

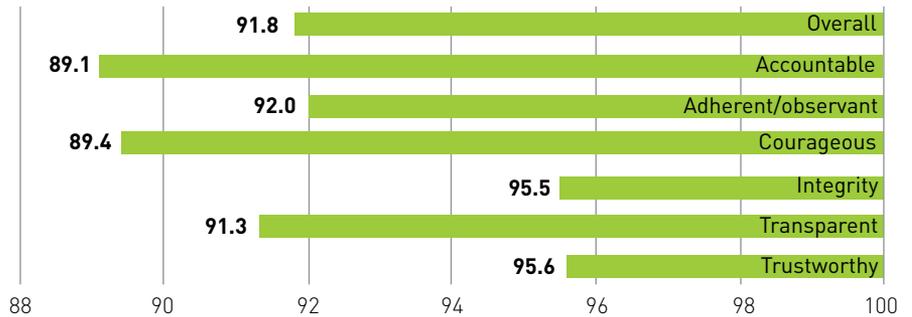
Panel 2 of the EAI provides a snapshot—based on your evaluation—of your organization’s ethical performance at this moment in time. The benchmark for each score in this panel (the number 100 on the graph) represents the average score of fellow AFP practitioners who have evaluated their organizations. Your organization is compared with the norm for other organizations that have been evaluated by AFP practitioners.

As in Panel 1, the first bar of this panel, “Composite,” compares your organization’s overall score with the overall score of organizations that have been evaluated by AFP members. The second through last bars compare your organization’s score with the AFP benchmark score along each of the six dimensions. Once again, the number 100 in each category represents the average of all AFP practitioners who have used this assessment to evaluate their organizations.

**3. Your individual results compared with those of your organization**

Panel 3 compares your individual results with your organization’s results. In this example, the panel suggests the degree to which there is alignment in your ethical performance and that of your organization at this moment in time. Remember that both your score and that of your organization are based on your personal evaluation.

**Panel 3 Your Individual Results Relative to Those of Your Organization**



The first bar of this panel, “Overall,” compares your organization’s composite score with your individual composite score. The other bars compare your organization’s score with your individual score along each of the six dimensions of ethical fundraising practice.

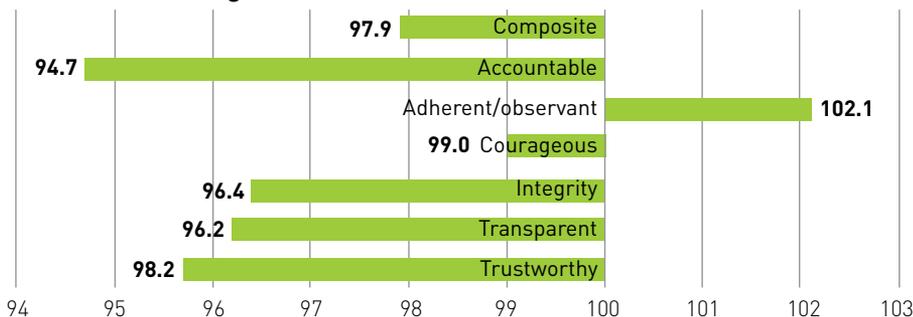
**Exploring Your Ethical Values**

As Pribbenow points out, the new Ethics Assessment Inventory represents an important sea change in how fundraisers might explore their ethical values not just to be in compliance with codes and standards but also to grow in ethical understanding and maturity. “This important shift—from simple compliance to a more nuanced focus on ethical development and growth—reflects a critical step in the development of the philanthropic fundraising profession,” he says. “I celebrate this shift and the difference it will make for how well our profession serves the public trust.”

An important aspect of the tool is that it is valuable for all AFP members, no matter how much experience they may have. “One might think that given my involvement with AFP’s ethics committee and editing *Ethical Fundraising: a Guide for Nonprofit Boards and Fundraisers*, that the Ethics Inventory Assessment may not be very helpful to me. On the contrary,” says Janice Gow Pettey, MNA, CFRE, principal with J. G. Pettey & Associates in San Francisco. “Early this year I volunteered to take part in a beta test of the EAI. When I settled in to fill out the inventory, I knew I could answer the questions with an ‘appropriate’ or ‘right’ answer based on my understanding of the AFP code and ethics, or I could reflect on my day at work and how I responded to some real issues involving ethical choices. I chose the latter and proceeded to take the inventory with my current mind-set prompting my answers.

“I hit ‘send’ and within a day or two I had a reply from Bob Shoemake, whose organization has worked with the ethics committee to make the inventory a reality. Basically, Bob said, ‘I know who you are, and I was surprised at the results.’ I explained that I chose to use the inventory for a calibration on how I act, not what I think is the correct reply. We all face ethical dilemmas in our daily lives—some small, some large. The results from the inventory provide a detached view of our perceived responses to ethical challenges at work. The in-

**Panel 2 Your Organization’s Results Relative to AFP Norm**



## EAI Frequently Asked Questions

**Q.** Who built this tool?

**A.** The AFP Ethical Assessment Inventory (EAI) was developed by The Center for Ethical Business Cultures (CEBC) at the University of St. Thomas–Minnesota, a 33-year-old nonprofit that works with leaders to create ethical and profitable cultures. The CEBC will remain involved with the EAI, conducting research based on data gathered.

**Q.** Why did AFP want the EAI?

**A.** Ethics are at the heart of AFP’s mission: “AFP, an association of professionals throughout the world, advances philanthropy by enabling people and organizations to practice ethical and effective fundraising.” The AFP Ethics Committee guided the development of the EAI as a tool for association members to assess and strengthen their practice as ethical fundraising professionals.

**Q.** What does the EAI measure?

**A.** The EAI assesses the ethical performance of AFP fundraising practitioners along six dimensions of ethical practice.

**Q.** Is this a test that I can flunk?

**A.** No. The EAI is a developmental tool designed to point out areas of strength and opportunities for growth in the ethical dimensions of your work as a fundraising professional.

**Q.** Will my participation or involvement affect my AFP membership?

**A.** No. Use of the AFP Ethical Assessment Inventory is completely voluntary.

**Q.** Will anyone besides me see the results?

**A.** No. Only you will see your personal data. AFP and CEBC will collect the aggregate data from all users for research purposes, but these data will be anonymous.

**Q.** Can my score mean that I am unethical?

**A.** No. Your score compares you with your peers within AFP. It presents your results along a continuum that points out areas of strength and areas in which you can improve your ethical performance. The creators of this assessment assume that you can continually improve the ethical dimensions of your practice as a fundraiser over a lifetime.

**Q.** How is the AFP Ethical Assessment Inventory relevant to me as a professional fundraiser?

**A.** There is a saying in manufacturing operations that you can’t improve what you don’t measure. The EAI measures your ethical performance so that you can continue to strengthen it. Given the critical importance ethical performance plays in successful fundraising, strengthening ethical performance seems highly relevant.

**Q.** Is it mandatory to use the AFP Ethics Assessment Inventory?

**A.** No. Using the EAI is completely voluntary. You should use the EAI if:

- you believe that your ethical performance is relevant to your success as a fundraiser
- you want a concrete picture of your ethical performance as a fundraiser
- you want to use the information to continue to improve your ethical performance

**Q.** How will I use the results to help me in my career?

**A.** Ethical performance as a fundraiser is not a guarantee of long-term success. However, without it you will certainly fail. You can use the EAI to identify areas that can be enhanced, as well as areas of strength that you can continue to develop.

**Q.** Do I want to gauge myself and my organization against my peers or against the ideal?

**A.** Both. The EAI gives you a current picture of yourself compared with your AFP peers. The ideal describes the aspirations toward which you hope to move. Having identified whatever gaps may exist between the actual and the aspirational, you can develop concrete strategies to close the gap.

**Q.** Can an organization’s CEO/executive director use the EAI?

**A.** The EAI was designed as an AFP member benefit. If the CEO is an AFP member, then he or she can certainly use the inventory. Otherwise, the only way he or she can use it is by licensing it from AFP.

**Q.** If the results are a “moment in time snapshot,” how often should I check back to reassess?

**A.** Until the data suggest otherwise, the EAI should be used not more frequently than once every six months.

tent of the inventory is not to prove how ethical we can be. The confidential responses to the EAI allowed me to reflect on my responses compared with how I perceived the organization’s responses to ethical dilemmas.

“Ethical decision making is not framed around a right or a wrong. We

often find competing ‘rights’ in the dilemmas we face. Ethical action involves others, and it is a process as much as an outcome. We are humans, and we bring our biases, values and culture to our interactions with others. To act ethically implies that we think ethically. What does that mean for you? For me,

it’s understanding that there’s room for assessing my actions and biases and evaluating the contribution I make to ethical issues.”

Indeed, the EAI is especially useful if you use the tool to assess your ethical responses and not to prove that you know what it means to “be ethical.”

## The Story Behind the Methodology

BY ROBERTO M. SOTO-ACOSTA

How do you analyze 2,500 responses, turning them first into 35 or so “dimensions of ethical behavior” and then honing them down to only six characteristics of ethical practice?

The initial data were gathered using a key informant technique in which a random sample of 10,000 AFP members were asked to describe ethical performance by fundraising professionals.

The data—more than 2,500 responses from almost 1,000 respondents—were then analyzed by a six-member research panel made up of seasoned fundraising professionals and AFP members using qualitative data clustering. I was honored to be a part of this work group, which met in Minneapolis over a chilly, three-day period.

The group members analyzed the 2,500 responses individually, “clustering” them into broad categories of behaviors. The data were further analyzed in group sessions, as we sought to narrow the results from roughly 35 or so dimensions of ethical fundraising practice to six dimensions. Given that there were many valid dimensions of ethical practice offered by the anonymous peers who had responded to the original survey, our charge was not easy.

Did the final six dimensions of behavior that we agreed upon—“Accountable,” “Adherent/Observant,” “Courageous,” “Integrity,” “Transparent” and “Trustworthy”—truly capture and convey the breadth and, sometimes more importantly, the spirit of our respondents? Why was it that the language of Shakespeare didn’t have a single adjective to describe someone who behaved “with integrity,” now that we needed it so desperately? Would we have to simply use “integrity,” as awkward as that sometimes sounds? (We did.) Does respect for the privacy of donors really translate into “trustworthiness,” or are ethical fundraisers “respectful”? Are people who obey the letter and spirit of the law adherent or observant or compliant? Are fundraisers who “tell it like it is” brave fundraisers, or are they courageous ones? This was much more than an exercise in wordsmithing.

Were the respondents’ observations about the characteris-

tics of an ethical fundraiser and leader applicable across cultures, from Minneapolis to São Paulo to Singapore and Cairo and beyond? Was an “ethical” fundraiser necessarily a successful and necessarily “professional” fundraiser? How did this suggested dimension fit within the *AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards*? What principles were involved? There was, to be sure, much discussed and much to be learned in the group. *Roget’s Thesaurus* was consulted on more than one occasion, as were the professionals from St. Thomas.

The group discussed the possible definitions for the ethical dimensions, examined them in the context of real and hypothetical ethical situations, and argued amicably yet passionately and intensely among ourselves as we sought to reach common ground consistent with our charge. The long, sometimes profound, frequently humorous sessions—interrupted by periods of individual reading and reflection on the data—were still very serious. We were clear about the singular importance that our deliberations would have for our profession.

Of all my experiences with AFP over the past 25 years, which includes board membership and several years on the ethics committee, my participation in the research panel has to be the most profound learning experience and opportunity for service to the profession that I have ever had. In less than three days a great bond developed among the panel members and our St. Thomas hosts as well.

To see the resulting survey fills me with pride in the knowledge that we have an instrument that should be applicable across cultures and help advance ethical fundraising worldwide. As a member of the ethics committee, I am greatly pleased to have been part of a process that brings AFP closer to the goal of facilitating ethics education for its members and their organizations. Members have a reality-based assessment tool that adds true substance to the annual ritual of signing their renewal forms and stating their adherence to the AFP code or, as some panel members would insist, their observance of the code.

*Roberto M. Soto-Acosta is with Roberto Soto Acosta Consulting in San Juan, Puerto Rico.*

“I don’t think anyone has all of the answers. I think we are being challenged to continually ask the questions,” Kintzi says. “I learned that this year when I served as chair of the AFP Ethics Think Tank. As we worked through the case studies it was clear to me that my interpretation of what is ‘right or ethical’ and what other AFP members’ opinions are of what is ‘right or ethical’ may not be completely compatible. We need to continue to have the conversation so we all make better deci-

The development of the Ethics Assessment Inventory was one of three strategic initiatives for AFP’s 50th anniversary. Funding was provided by AFP members and chapters through the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy. These include Suzanne Hittman; Ellen Livingston, CFRE; M. Anne Murphy, CFRE; AFP CA, Golden Gate Chapter; AFP CA, Orange County Chapter; AFP CA, Silicon Valley Chapter; AFP IL, Chicago Chapter; AFP NE, Nebraska Chapter; AFP OH, North Central Chapter; and AFP PA, Greater Philadelphia Chapter.

sions when challenging questions are posed. I think the assessment is a great tool to help us continue on our journey to be the most ethical practitioners we can be and to help us keep asking those questions.”

*Bob Shoemake is director, programs and membership, at The Center for Ethical Business Cultures ([www.cebcglobal.org](http://www.cebcglobal.org)), Opus College of Business, University of St. Thomas—Minnesota ([www.stthomas.edu](http://www.stthomas.edu)) in Minneapolis.*