

Getting value from ethics CPD as an **early-career lawyer**

Ethics is the cornerstone of the legal profession. When a lawyer's ethics and competence are brought into question, it damages the reputation of the profession and can undermine public trust and confidence in the justice system.

Behaving ethically is so much more than just knowing the rules, knowing what is right or being a good person or lawyer.

Having started your legal career, you should seek to establish the ethical practices, skills and knowledge that will set you up for a successful and healthy relationship with the profession you have worked so hard to join.

Understanding ethical frameworks

There are many frameworks that can help promote good ethical practices in your career. To help you more easily identify areas to focus on in your continuing professional development (CPD), we have amalgamated them under three interrelated headings:

- 1. Sensitivity** – Being sensitive means recognising ethical conflicts or the need to take ethical action. As well as understanding the ethical codes that govern the legal profession, you must be able to recognise when and where ethical risks and conflicts may arise so that you know to address them.
- 2. Context** – To be ethical, you need to be aware of, and have tools in place, to address the situational and organisational factors and thinking errors that may influence you in either taking (or not taking) ethical action. Wellbeing and practice management are also relevant considerations here, as neglecting these areas can put you at risk of unethical behaviour and/or may reflect an already poor ethical working environment.
- 3. Confidence** – Having the confidence to know how to apply the rules is fundamental to feeling empowered to take ethical action and make ethical decisions.

Now is the time in your career to establish the routines and ways of thinking that will help you get the most out of your CPD – including in ethics – and become the lawyer you want to be.

Adopting a reflective mindset

A critical part of being a lawyer is the ability to reflect on the way you think about situations and your subsequent behaviour, so you can identify areas for improvement and create new processes for addressing the complex legal and social problems you encounter.

We recommend bringing an active reflective mindset to your CPD. This involves:

- taking note of what you already know, feel and understand about a process, action or concept;
- considering and acknowledging whether there is a difference between what you say you do and what you actually do;
- identifying gaps in your knowledge, skills or other areas and competencies for improvement;
- charting a path to undertake this improvement; and
- evaluating whether the remedial action taken achieved the outcomes that you were seeking and identifying any further action.

Putting in place this reflective approach will help you avoid becoming complacent about your ethical obligations.

Refining your CPD plan using our reflective questionnaire

Our reflective questionnaire is a good starting point for understanding what type of ethics CPD activities you should undertake.

While not a diagnostic tool, it offers a set of prompts to help you identify gaps in your ethical skills and knowledge, as well as actions you can take to address them over a 12-month period.

You may find it useful to talk to a trusted mentor or colleague before (or after) completing the questionnaire or choosing CPD activities to address your needs.

In keeping with the reflective process, we recommend maintaining a record of your answers and your CPD plan. After taking actions to address areas of identified need, you can circle back to your record to see whether you feel you have achieved the outcomes you were seeking.

Reflective Questionnaire

Ethical decision-making is affected by your ethical sensitivity, personal context and your confidence in dealing with ethical issues in your practice.

The first part of this questionnaire asks you to consider statements and decide how frequently they apply to you in the areas of sensitivity, context and confidence. Carefully consider the statements on the left and select the frequency with which the statement applies to you.

Once complete, please move on to the 'Suggested actions and opportunities' section.

Areas of ethical consideration, behaviours and capabilities

Frequency – how often the statement applies

	Never applies to me	Rarely applies to me	Sometimes applies to me	Frequently applies to me
Sensitivity				
1A I am not confident that I can recognise when to apply particular ethical obligations in appropriate situations				
1B I am uncertain about some of the ethical rules/boundaries that apply to my area of practice				
1C My area of practice does not require me to consider my ethical obligations				
1D I experience situations where the requirements of the ethical rules/boundaries do not 'feel right' to me				

Areas of ethical consideration, behaviours and capabilities

Frequency – how often the statement applies

		Never applies to me	Rarely applies to me	Sometimes applies to me	Frequently applies to me	
Context	Behavioural	2A	I do things in legal practice without considering the ethics of the situation because that is how I have been shown to do them			
		2B	If my 'boss' tells me to do something, I do it without considering the ethical implications because they know best			
		2C	I feel I need to 'toe the line' at my firm/organisation, even though I am uncomfortable with it, to make sure I get ahead in my career			
		2D	I have felt pressure to take an ethical shortcut because there was a rational reason why it was ok, e.g. it didn't hurt anyone's interests			
	Practice Management	2E	I have trouble keeping track of the status of my files			
		2F	I have too much work so I can't keep my files up to date			
		2G	I have no control over the work I do			
		2H	I feel overwhelmed when prioritising my daily administrative tasks (billing, filing, reporting etc.) alongside providing legal services			
	Wellbeing	2I	I put off doing the things that assist me to de-stress or unwind because I have important work to get done			
		2J	I feel overwhelmed and/or feel like I can't deal with another client/more work			
		2K	I have had enough of legal practice and am thinking about leaving the profession			
		2L	I work late and/or feel fatigued at the start of each day			
2M		I rely on stimulants to wake up and/or suppressants, e.g. alcohol or medication, to calm down enough to go to sleep				

Areas of ethical consideration, behaviours and capabilities

Frequency – how often the statement applies

		Never applies to me	Rarely applies to me	Sometimes applies to me	Frequently applies to me
Confidence	Decision-making	3A I experience uncertainty when trying to apply the rules/boundaries in my area of practice			
		3B I feel very isolated in making decisions in practice, i.e. I have no one I can talk to			
		3C I experience situations where the ethical rules/boundaries appear to conflict, and I am uncertain how to resolve them			
	Taking Ethical Action	3D If my client instructs me to do something that doesn't feel right, I feel pressure to do it and/or I don't know how to say that I can't			
		3E If my supervisor/colleagues tell me to do something that is against my ethical obligations, it is not my place to question them and/or I don't know how to say I can't			
		3F My supervisor/colleagues wouldn't like it if I questioned them on the ethics of a situation			
		3G When I make an error, I feel a sense of panic to fix it without letting anyone know that I have made the error			
		3H I don't have any plans/words to respond to common ethical situations that I face in my practice			

Suggested actions and opportunities

After you have completed the reflective questionnaire, take time to review the responses and make note of statements that apply to you “sometimes” and “frequently”. These answers suggest that you may be in need of further information, support or skills to assist you to make ethical decisions.

Use your answers from the reflective questionnaire together with the table below to identify what you can do to address any gaps. For example, if you’re concerned about your response to Question 3B, go to the corresponding area of consideration in the table (CONFIDENCE – Decision-making) for suggested CPD opportunities. As you do, reflect on the following questions:

- What outcomes do you want for yourself from any ethics-related CPD?
- What forms of CPD are going to assist you to address areas of ethical uncertainty and achieve your desired outcomes?

Area of Consideration	Suggested CPD Opportunities
Sensitivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify CPD opportunities related to your area of practice that embed ethical considerations into their program. To best meet your needs, we recommend looking for programs that facilitate active engagement in identifying issues through scenarios and how to resolve them. This could include dialogue-style panels or interactive workshops for exploring ethical issues with colleagues, rather than a lecture or seminar. • Seek formal or informal mentoring relationships with more senior people in your area of practice. Discuss with them common ethical considerations they encounter and/or debrief in relation to the areas of ethical practice you encounter. Ensure the mentoring environment is diverse so that you are not just getting one viewpoint. • Once you have identified the common ethical considerations in your area of law, consider putting in place checklists or other workflow management practices so you do not overlook them when they occur.
Context – Behavioural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify CPD opportunities that will build your understanding of behavioural ethics, i.e. the effect of situational, organisational and thinking errors on your performance. Ideally, these offerings should provide you with interactive, reflective and action planning opportunities so that you can put what you have learnt into practice. • Explore online resources such as Ethics Unwrapped and conduct a reflective evaluation of how the concepts discussed in these resources may be influencing your own practice. • Cultivate formal or informal mentoring relationships or networks that specifically consider issues that may be affecting your practice.

Context – Practice Management

- Consider whether there are any underlying stressors or health issues that are affecting your ability to cope. You may be better off addressing those as a first priority, not the symptoms.
- Do a self-assessment to determine what specific skills and competencies you want to develop further, e.g. goal setting, setting priorities, time management, file management, project management.
- Identify CPD or other training opportunities that will support you in developing the practice management skills relevant to your role and practice area. Particularly look for training that will give you good practical tips and outcomes. As some of these skills are generic, you may find it helpful to look beyond traditional CPD offerings to find the product that you need; remember that CPD doesn't have to be delivered by lawyers or legal CPD providers to be acceptable for the purposes of your CPD requirements. Also remember that 'mastery' may take more than 60 minutes!
- If you have concerns that your workload is excessive, this may affect you or your organisation's ability to deliver competent legal services. Be aware that being unable to deliver competent legal services is potentially a professional disciplinary problem for yourself and your employer, and a potential OHS risk for your employer. An excessive workload may point to inadequate training and/or supervision, and in some circumstances may also constitute workplace bullying. With regards to concerns about excessive workload, we encourage you to raise your concerns with an appropriate person in the organisation if you are able to do so, or contact the LIV's [Guidance Contacts & Support Lines](#). Where you encounter workplace bullying or issues with supervision and training, you can contact the VLSB+C or Worksafe as external regulators.

Context – Wellbeing

- Identify the key stressor(s) that may be affecting your wellbeing and consider whether the stressor(s) are most effectively dealt with through training, mentoring, health interventions or support, or even by identifying further opportunities outside the legal profession to support your wellbeing.
- If the problem can be resolved by training and development, identify the knowledge/skills that, if enhanced, would make a positive difference to your comfort and effectiveness, either in the workplace specifically or more generally:
 - Consider whether there are CPD offerings that may assist you in developing these skills – noting that you may need to access training offerings provided by non-legal CPD providers. There are various options depending on your budget and needs. Some examples are the 14-day Mindful Billable Unit Bootcamp from [The Mindful Lawyers](#), the [Mindarma](#) online e-learning program, and training from [FrontTier](#).
 - The University of Melbourne's [Mindfulness and Stress Reduction Resources](#) also lists relevant books, apps and online modules on wellbeing and mindfulness that may be helpful.
- Cultivate formal or informal mentoring relationships or networks that provide you with the opportunities to debrief from your practice experiences in an ethically sound manner.
- Consider whether engaging or re-engaging with a hobby and/or family or community members/organisations may enhance your wellbeing.
- Consider whether you are taking adequate time out from work including annual leave, mental health days and other sick leave, long service leave, or time-in-lieu.

**Context –
Wellbeing**
Continued

- Please consider whether a health intervention or similar support is appropriate. The VLBS+C recognises that legal practice can place significant pressures on lawyers and your wellbeing is paramount.
- There are dedicated organisations and services that provide care, and assistance and information for lawyers who are experiencing difficulties coping. These include:
 - [LIV Member Counselling Service](#) – a 24-hour confidential, independent wellbeing service for LIV members (telephone 1800 818 728);
 - [Victorian Bar Health Crisis Help Services](#) – a 24-hour confidential, counselling service for barristers (telephone 03 9650 5540 or 1300 687 327); and
 - [Minds Count Foundation's](#) research and resources (formerly the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation, their objective is to decrease distress, disability and the causes of depression and anxiety in the legal profession).
- There are also general support organisations and services that you can access:
 - [beyondblue](#) – an Australia-wide mental health organisation, providing comprehensive online information on the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety and how to help someone (telephone 1300 22 4636);
 - [The Black Dog Institute](#) – a not-for-profit, educational, research, clinical and community-oriented medical research institute offering specialist expertise in depression and bipolar disorder;
 - [Blue Knot Foundation](#) – the National Centre of Excellence for complex trauma, which provides resources and advocacy for those who have experienced or are caring for someone dealing with complex trauma (telephone 1300 657 380).
- The Legal Practitioners' Liability Committee also provides a [resources page](#) on wellbeing and mental health.
- If you are concerned that your circumstances are such that your ability to satisfactorily carry out the inherent requirements of legal practice may be affected, you should read the [VLBS+C's Mental Health Policy](#). The policy makes it clear that we will treat lawyers with mental health conditions fairly and sensitively. We encourage lawyers who are experiencing a mental health condition to voluntarily seek appropriate treatment and only require lawyers to disclose mental health conditions to us if their condition will affect their ability to meet their legal practice obligations.

**Confidence –
Decision-making**

- Familiarise yourself with resources and/or literature on ethical decision-making in the legal profession, such as:
 - the Law Institute of Victoria's [Ethics Information Hub](#) (for members)
 - the Queensland Law Society's [Ethical Deliberation Questionnaire](#)
 - the Ethics Centre's [Ethics Unboxed](#) online course and other articles and research in ethics
- Access the LIV's [Ethics Support Line](#) on **03 9607 9336** (which is available to all members of the profession) for specific work-related questions.
- Look for CPD opportunities that involve active and interactive learning and take a problem-solving approach to ethics issues. These might include panels or workshops that focus on current or emerging ethics issues or focus on issues related to your area of practice that embed ethical considerations into their design and delivery.
- Cultivate formal or informal mentoring relationships with practitioners you respect and who may be able to help you develop your sense of professional values and decision-making skills.

**Confidence –
Taking Ethical Action**

- Look for CPD opportunities involving active and interactive learning that provides you with opportunities to practise how you are going to respond to ethical conflicts in the workplace when you know the right thing to do but need to feel empowered to take action.
 - For general support, consider accessing resources on ethical actions such as the Giving Voices to Values curriculum by Mary Gentile – available through [Ethics Unwrapped](#) or the [Darden University website](#).
 - Establish formal or informal mentoring relationships or networks that provide you with opportunities to practise how to take ethical action in a supportive environment.
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Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

Level 5, 555 Bourke Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000

Telephone

03 9679 8001

Website

lsbc.vic.gov.au



We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which our office sits, the Wurundjeri People, and pay our respects to their Elders; past, present and emerging.