

A WORD ABOUT ETHICS

APPEARANCES OF BIAS

When do a Federal employee's personal relationships conflict with official duties?

- An employee is disqualified from working on a matter if a named party is (or is represented by) someone with whom the employee has a close relationship, so such relationships may create conflicts. They are called "covered relationships" and are defined in ethics regulations.

What are "covered relationships?"

- An employee has a "covered relationship" with:
 - anyone with whom the employee has (or is seeking) a business or financial relationship;
 - a recent former employer or client (for one year or two years, depending on severance arrangements and whether the employee is a political appointee);
 - a close relative;
 - a household member;
 - a current or prospective employer or client of the employee's parents, dependent children, or spouse; and
 - an organization in which the employee is an active participant.

Are any other factors considered?

- Yes. Disqualification is only necessary if the employee's participation would cause an appearance of loss of impartiality.

How are appearance problems resolved?

- An employee must either:
 - not work on a matter in which an appearance of bias is likely because of a personal relationship, or
 - obtain special authorization to work on the matter, which may be granted if the agency's need for the employee's participation outweighs the appearance of impropriety concern; such authorization may be sought through the Ethics Law and Programs Division.

What if an appearance of bias is not from a "covered relationship?"

- An employee should discuss with a supervisor whether a matter should be reassigned if someone with whom the employee has a personal relationship, such as a friend, is involved. The decision on whether to reassign the matter would be based on management concerns, rather than ethics regulations.