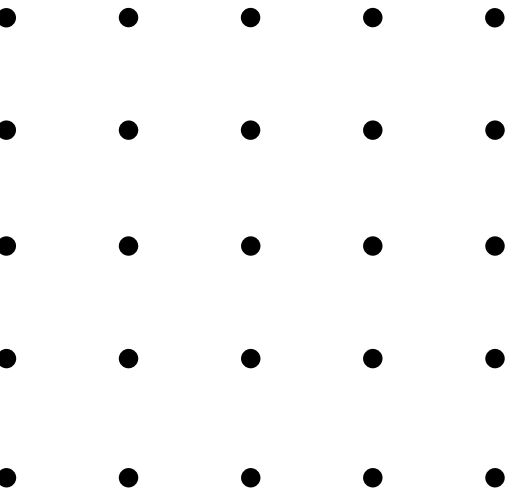




# Ethics Case Study: Reigning on the Parade

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# What Happened?



Frank Whelan, a features writer who also wrote a history column for the Allentown, Pennsylvania, Morning Call, took part in a gay rights parade in June 2006 and stirred up a classic ethical dilemma. The situation raises any number of questions about what is and isn't a conflict of interest. Whelan, 56, and his partner of 25 years, Bob Wittman, were the co-grand marshals of a gay pride parade. His newspaper prohibits employees from taking part in "public demonstrations in favor of or opposed to a cause." His editors say Whelan didn't seek their permission to participate in the event. A subsidiary publication co-sponsored the parade, but Call editors say they didn't know of Whelan's involvement until they saw a press release. Two days before the parade, they warned him that his role would be a conflict, a breach of the code, and that there would be "consequences" if he participated. Whelan said their roles as grand marshals were a celebration of his and Wittman's long-term relationship.

# What “consequences” should Frank Whelan face?

## Things to Consider:

### WHO

Consider the decision-maker (the editor, in this case) and those affected by their decision (Whelan, his partner, the parade organizers, supporters and opponents to marriage equality, and the newspaper's reputation.)

### WHY

It's unprofessional, and unethical, to engage in activities that “may compromise integrity or damage credibility.” But there are other questions that should be asked. Is “gay pride” a political cause? Was the parade a demonstration or merely a celebration, intended to advocate or merely to entertain?

### HOW

In this case, you'd want to be fair to a long-time employee – minimizing harm, in other words. Is a suspension in order? Paid or unpaid? A change in assignment, perhaps? Or would that be too harsh? Ask the right questions to satisfy yourself that your solution is the best outcome.



# Act Independently

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.



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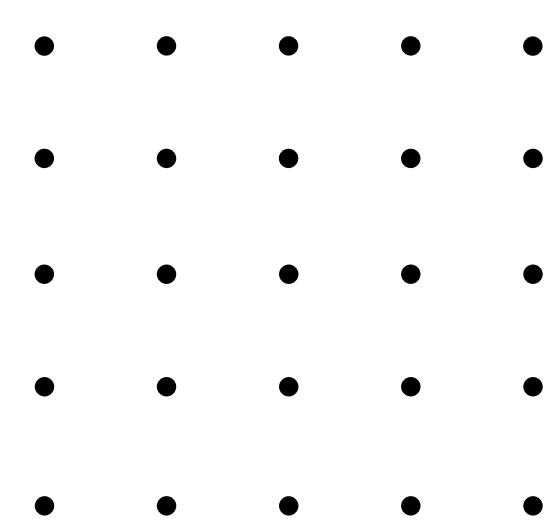
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# The Result

Whelan, upset by his employer's reaction, took two days off after which the paper told him it would consider that an unpaid suspension. "I basically walked out the door," he said in January 2009, even though he was asked to return after the two days.

Whelan filed three lawsuits: sexual discrimination in violation of a city ordinance, age discrimination and defamation. All three claims were settled out of court, he said. The Morning Call's owners, the Tribune Co., agreed to pay two years of severance to Whelan and two years of medical benefits for him and his partner, he said.



# The End

Let's Discuss!

