



## The “Who’s the Client?” Conundrum

- One of in-house counsels’ biggest challenges:
  - making clear who they represent
  - and, of equal importance, who they do not represent.
- Challenging because we are fellow employees and may have collaborated on other matters.
- Most often arises in:
  - HR/Employee Discipline matters
  - Ethics hotline/internal whistleblower complaints
  - Government or SRO inquiries
- For in-house counsel, we know who our client is: the company. **See Texas Rule 1.12(a); Model Rule 1.13(a).**
  - Typically not an issue where all interests align. **Texas Rule 1.12, Com. 5.**
- But do our officers, directors and co-workers truly understand where our loyalties lie?

## But what if there is or could be a conflict?

- Rules burden the lawyer to clarify the relationships.
- A lawyer must explain the client’s identity when:
  - it is apparent that the company’s interests are adverse to those of the constituents with whom the lawyer is dealing, or
  - when explanation appears reasonably necessary to avoid misunderstanding on their part. **Texas Rule 1.12(e); Model Rule 1.13(f).**
- When the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that an unrepresented person misunderstands the lawyer’s role, the lawyer must make reasonable efforts to correct the misunderstanding. **Texas Rule 4.03; Model Rule 4.3.**

## What to say when there is a potential conflict

- Where you think the company may be, or later become, adverse to the co-worker, you should inform them:
  - That there is a conflict or potential conflict of interest;
  - That you represent the company and cannot represent or provide legal advice to the co-worker;
  - That the co-worker may not be able to assert privilege over communications with you; and
  - That the co-worker may wish to obtain independent representation. ***Texas Rule 1.12, Comment 4.***
- Advisable to contemporaneously document this disclosure.

## Internal Investigations or Government/SRO Inquiries

- Heightened consequences amplify the “Who’s the Client?” question.
  - DOJ’s Yates Memo and SEC’s Cooperation Program both incentivize companies to turn over information about individual culpability.
- *Upjohn* warnings are critical in these contexts.
  - ABA Model *Upjohn* disclosures are a good starting place.
  - Consider putting them in writing and having employees acknowledge receipt.
  - Is potential conflict or consequence so great as to merit separate counsel?
- Doing this poorly can have grave consequences.
  - *Sandusky/Penn State* cases

Find the full text of this and thousands of other resources from leading experts in dozens of legal practice areas in the [UT Law CLE eLibrary \(utcle.org/elibrary\)](http://utcle.org/elibrary)

Title search: Ethical Considerations in Government Investigations

Also available as part of the eCourse

[2018 Government Enforcement eConference](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the  
5<sup>th</sup> Annual Government Enforcement Institute session  
"Ethical Considerations in Government Investigations"