

4-1.13 | ORGANIZATION AS CLIENT

(a) Representation of Organization. A lawyer employed or retained by an organization represents the organization acting through its duly authorized constituents.

(b) Violations by Officers or Employees of Organization. If a lawyer for an organization knows that an officer, employee, or other person associated with the organization is engaged in action, intends to act, or refuses to act in a matter related to the representation that is a violation of a legal obligation to the organization or a violation of law that reasonably might be imputed to the organization and is likely to result in substantial injury to the organization, the lawyer shall proceed as is reasonably necessary in the best interest of the organization. In determining how to proceed, the lawyer shall give due consideration to the seriousness of the violation and its consequences, the scope and nature of the lawyer's representation, the responsibility in the organization and the apparent motivation of the person involved, the policies of the organization concerning such matters, and any other relevant considerations. Any measures taken shall be designed to minimize disruption of the organization and the risk of revealing information relating to the representation to persons outside the organization. Such measures may include among others:

- (1) asking reconsideration of the matter;
- (2) advising that a separate legal opinion on the matter be sought for presentation to appropriate authority in the organization; and
- (3) referring the matter to higher authority in the organization, including, if warranted by the seriousness of the matter, referral to the highest authority that can act in behalf of the organization as determined by applicable law.

(c) Resignation as Counsel for Organization. If, despite the lawyer's efforts in accordance with subdivision (b), the highest authority that can act on behalf of the organization insists upon action, or a refusal to act, that is clearly a violation of law and is likely to result in substantial injury to the organization, the lawyer may resign in accordance with rule 4-1.16.



(d) Identification of Client. In dealing with an organization's directors, officers, employees, members, shareholders, or other constituents, a lawyer shall explain the identity of the client when the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the organization's interests are adverse to those of the constituents with whom the lawyer is dealing.

(e) Representing Directors, Officers, Employees, Members, Shareholders, or Other Constituents of Organization. A lawyer representing an organization may also represent any of its directors, officers, employees, members, shareholders, or other constituents, subject to the provisions of rule 4-1.7. If the organization's consent to the dual representation is required by rule 4-1.7, the consent shall be given by an appropriate official of the organization other than the individual who is to be represented, or by the shareholders.

(Amended July 23, 1992, effective Jan. 1, 1993 (605 So.2d 252); amended March 23, 2006, effective May 22, 2006 (933 So.2d 417).)

Comments

The entity as the client

An organizational client is a legal entity, but it cannot act except through its officers, directors, employees, shareholders, and other constituents. Officers, directors, employees, and shareholders are the constituents of the corporate organizational client. The duties defined in this comment apply equally to unincorporated associations. "Other constituents" as used in this comment means the positions equivalent to officers, directors, employees, and shareholders held by persons acting for organizational clients that are not corporations.

When 1 of the constituents of an organizational client communicates with the organization's lawyer in that person's organizational capacity, the communication is protected by rule 4-1.6. Thus, by way of example, if an organizational client requests its lawyer to investigate allegations of wrongdoing, interviews made in the course of that investigation between the lawyer and the client's employees or other constituents are covered by rule 4-1.6. This does not mean, however, that constituents of an organizational client are the clients of the lawyer. The lawyer may not disclose to such constituents information relating to the representation except for disclosures explicitly or impliedly authorized by the organizational client in order to carry out the representation or as otherwise permitted by rule 4-1.6.

When constituents of the organization make decisions for it, the decisions ordinarily must be accepted by the lawyer even if their utility or prudence is doubtful. Decisions concerning policy and operations, including ones entailing serious risk, are not as such in the lawyer's province.



However, different considerations arise when the lawyer knows that the organization may be substantially injured by action of a constituent that is in violation of law. In such a circumstance, it may be reasonably necessary for the lawyer to ask the constituent to reconsider the matter. If that fails, or if the matter is of sufficient seriousness and importance to the organization, it may be reasonably necessary for the lawyer to take steps to have the matter reviewed by a higher authority in the organization. Clear justification should exist for seeking review over the head of the constituent normally responsible for it. The stated policy of the organization may define circumstances and prescribe channels for such review, and a lawyer should encourage the formulation of such a policy. Even in the absence of organization policy, however, the lawyer may have an obligation to refer a matter to higher authority, depending on the seriousness of the matter and whether the constituent in question has apparent motives to act at variance with the organization's interest. Review by the chief executive officer or by the board of directors may be required when the matter is of importance commensurate with their authority. At some point it may be useful or essential to obtain an independent legal opinion.

The organization's highest authority to whom a matter may be referred ordinarily will be the board of directors or similar governing body. However, applicable law may prescribe that under certain conditions highest authority reposes elsewhere; for example, in the independent directors of a corporation.

Relation to other rules

The authority and responsibility provided in this rule are concurrent with the authority and responsibility provided in other rules. In particular, this rule does not limit or expand the lawyer's responsibility under rule 4-1.6, 4-1.8, 4-1.16, 4-3.3, or 4-4.1. If the lawyer's services are being used by an organization to further a crime or fraud by the organization, rule 4-1.2(d) can be applicable.

Government agency

The duty defined in this rule applies to governmental organizations. However, when the client is a governmental organization, a different balance may be appropriate between maintaining confidentiality and assuring that the wrongful official act is prevented or rectified, for public business is involved. In addition, duties of lawyers employed by the government or lawyers in military service may be defined by statutes and regulation. Defining precisely the identity of the client and prescribing the resulting obligations of such lawyers may be more difficult in the government context and is a matter beyond the scope of these rules. Although in some circumstances the client may be a specific agency, it may also be a branch of the government, such as the executive branch, or the government as a whole. For example, if the action or failure to act involves the head of a bureau, either the department of which the bureau is a part or the relevant branch of government may be the client for purposes of this rule. Moreover, in a matter involving the conduct of government officials, a government lawyer may have authority under applicable law to question such conduct more extensively than that of a lawyer for a private organization in similar circumstances. This rule does not limit that authority.



Clarifying the lawyer's role

There are times when the organization's interest may be or becomes adverse to those of 1 or more of its constituents. In such circumstances the lawyer should advise any constituent whose interest the lawyer finds adverse to that of the organization of the conflict or potential conflict of interest that the lawyer cannot represent such constituent and that such person may wish to obtain independent representation. Care must be taken to assure that the constituent understands that, when there is such adversity of interest, the lawyer for the organization cannot provide legal representation for that constituent and that discussions between the lawyer for the organization and the constituent may not be privileged.

Whether such a warning should be given by the lawyer for the organization to any constituent may turn on the facts of each case.

Dual representation

Subdivision (e) recognizes that a lawyer for an organization may also represent a principal officer or major shareholder.

Derivative actions

Under generally prevailing law, the shareholders or members of a corporation may bring suit to compel the directors to perform their legal obligations in the supervision of the organization. Members of unincorporated associations have essentially the same right. Such an action may be brought nominally by the organization, but usually is, in fact, a legal controversy over management of the organization.

The question can arise whether counsel for the organization may defend such an action. The proposition that the organization is the lawyer's client does not alone resolve the issue. Most derivative actions are a normal incident of an organization's affairs, to be defended by the organization's lawyer like any other suit. However, if the claim involves serious charges of wrongdoing by those in control of the organization, a conflict may arise between the lawyer's duty to the organization and the lawyer's relationship with the board. In those circumstances, rule 4-1.7 governs who should represent the directors and the organization.

Representing related organizations

Consistent with the principle expressed in subdivision (a) of this rule, a lawyer or law firm who represents or has represented a corporation (or other organization) ordinarily is not presumed to also represent, solely by virtue of representing or having represented the client, an organization (such as a corporate parent or subsidiary) that is affiliated with the client. There are exceptions to this general proposition, such as, for example, when an affiliate actually is the alter ego of the organizational client or when the client has revealed confidential information to an attorney with the reasonable expectation that the information would not be used adversely to the client's affiliate(s). Absent such an exception, an attorney or law firm is not ethically precluded from undertaking representations adverse to affiliates of an existing or former client.

