As we engage in professional activities, we are conscious of wanting to use good judgment in making decisions that impact our clients and our profession. When faced with a practice dilemma, an important step in meeting a standard of care is to consult with a colleague. As a general rule, that is a wise and integral aspect in thoughtful decision-making and can help us identify a course of action that considers the best interests of our clients and avoids harm. It is an aspect of “best practices” in our profession. However, most of us probably were not taught how to decide with whom to consult in any given situation. Selecting the most appropriate colleague with whom to consult can make the difference between an effective and useful consultation and one that offers support and validation (both important) but may be short on relevant expertise.

Concerns that confront us in practice dilemmas can be legal, ethical, clinical, and/or risk management in nature, and often more than one of these components. A useful strategy when confronted with a professional issue is to first identify which of these components is/are relevant. If your professional “antennae” vibrate to any of the questions below, you may want to seek consultation in that area(s):

- **Legal**: Is there a law(s) I am mandated to comply with OR is this a situation in which I have some legal leeway e.g., Where I may do something?
- **Ethical**: Are there relevant General Principles and/or Ethical Standards from the APA Ethics Code that apply?
- **Clinical**: Are there therapist, client, relationship, and/or other factors present in this dilemma?
- **Risk Management**: What is the likelihood of a bad clinical outcome or negative professional consequences?

Once you have a sense of the type(s) of issues that are involved in your dilemma or question, the next step is to decide whom to ask for consultation. In response to CPA's Ethics Committee survey (thanks to those of you who completed it!), many people noted that they would turn to trusted colleagues for help with ethical questions.

“Trusted colleague” can mean a professionally trusted colleague, who has the relevant expertise (e.g., ethics, legal, risk management, particular clinical issues). This meaning of “trusted colleague” opens the door to a variety of resources, depending on the nature of the problem or question. For risk management and/or legal questions, you can contact your malpractice insurance carrier (which typically provides free consultation) or Chuck Faltz, CPA's Director of Professional Affairs. For ethical questions, you can contact CPA's Ethics Committee or a colleague who has expertise in ethics. For clinical questions (e.g., “How best can I serve my patient or client at this juncture?”), you can obtain consultation with someone whose expertise matches the specific clinical questions you have. (In addition, for clinical questions, APAs ethical code – including the aspirational General Principles – also serves as an overall guide.)

“Trusted colleague” can also refer to a personally trusted colleague – whom you know and trust to be helpful and/or nonjudgmental (in whom you can confide). For many types of clinical questions, personally trusted colleagues can be enormously helpful. Although you may feel supported and validated by consultation with a personally trusted colleague, for some types of questions or problems, that colleague may not necessarily have the expertise to answer adequately or accurately your specific questions. When you obtain consultation from a personally trusted colleague about an ethical, legal, or risk management question – or a clinical question that has any or all of these elements – you’ll want to make sure this colleague has expertise in these areas. If not, the next step may be to get an additional consult with someone who has the relevant expertise.

In conclusion, obtaining consultation is a multi-step process; the first step is recognizing that consultation is desired or needed. The next step is determining the nature of the questions or issues – legal, ethical, clinical, risk management, or some combination of these – so that you can obtain the appropriate consultation(s) to address your concerns. Finally, when choosing a consultant, consider whether that person has the background to provide the type of consultation you need.