Frequent Flyer

In July 1997, I issued ETHICS ADVISORY #97-02 because of a Mike Causey column in ***The Washington Post*** that reported a Merit Systems Protection Board case that upheld a 30-day suspension of an employee who used his official frequent flyer miles (FFMs) for personal travel.

In May 1999, I issued ETHICS ADVISORY #99-02 to explain some important aspects of the Secretary of the Army's new travel policy issued on 8 April 1999. Included in that was his new direction on the use of FFMs earned by Army employees while on official travel.

Now, in the 28 September 2000 edition of ***USA Today***, there is a report of a defense official working at Fort Gordon, who is accused of using over $4,000 worth of FFMs earned while on official travel, for personal travel. Although the report says that the Department of Justice (DOJ) has declined to prosecute, I suggest that the very fact that the matter was referred to DOJ for prosecution, demonstrates the importance of following the rules. The matter has been turned over to the employee's supervisor.

Hence, I figure that it's time for an update to ensure that there are no memory lapses concerning the FFM rules. FFMs earned while traveling on official business belong to the Government, and we may not use them for our personal travel, to include travel while on permissive TDY. We may not give them away to a charity. FFM accounts for official travel should be kept separate from personal travel accounts. If we commingle our official and personal FFMs in a single account, all FFMs within the account are considered to belong to the Government absent a clear accounting to the contrary (so, keep records!).

How do we use the FFMs earned while on official travel? We use them to reduce the cost of future official travel.

Can we use the official FFMs to upgrade our class of travel? Maybe, but probably not. Here are the rules with respect to upgrades:

***** We may never use official FFMs to upgrade to first-class, unless we are otherwise authorized to fly first-class in accordance with the JTR/JFTR and the SECARMY 9 Apr 99 travel policy. First-class travel requires Secretary of the Army approval. Here is an important point: if there are only two classes on a flight (as many (most?) flights seem to be today), the upper class is always considered to be first-class, whatever the airline might call it -- even if the airline calls it "business-class."

* We might be able to upgrade to premium-class (less than first-class) travel, but the SECARMY policy is more restrictive than the other services, and permits such an upgrade only if:

-- The traveler is authorized to fly premium-class (less than first-class) under the criteria set out by the JTR/JFTR and the SECARMY 9 Apr 99 policy; or

-- The airline does not permit the use of the FFMs for anything other than an upgrade; or

-- The traveler does not have enough FFMs for a ticket or other reduction in travel costs, but absent a redemption for an upgrade, the FFMs will expire and go unused. Otherwise, the traveler is expected to let the FFMs accrue until there are enough FFMs to apply to future travel requirements.

For additional related travel information, see ETHICS ADVISORY 1999-02, in the LotusNotes Ethics Database.

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