

Empowering ethical choices: Hands-on strategies and research perspectives

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Ethical Dilemmas

- Ethical decision-making (EDM) only exists when faced with an ethical dilemma.
- A situation in which you must make a choice between differing courses of action, often which transgresses a moral principle/value.
- Moral principle – standard of right and wrong that a person or group has. Passed down through cultural/family norms, dictated by society or region. Can change depending on experiences.

Everyone needs ethical decision-making training

- In an organization with a hierarchy command exists a strong motivator for behavior. What happens with the boss isn't ethical? The goal is to have solid training in EDM at all levels.
- Making good followers into good leaders requires a maturity of critical thinking grounded in healthy personal values. Our understanding of right and wrong is considered a socially constructed system. Parents, schools, communities, education, geography are part of the system. One's value system is not innate.
- When you have socially constructed values, they *may* align with what your organization needs, but they may not. Organization members may be anywhere on the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2000).
- What I see in business ethics training usually involves an annual click-through presentation that is not personalized or targeted to situations faced by the individual on the job. Ethics training should be ongoing and interactive (Craft, 2010).
- When training adults, interaction and participation are vital. The job of educators of adults is to ensure they are self-directed in their learning. Part of the job of educators of adults is to help learners, whether they are learning on their own or in formal learning programs, to be able to plan, carry out, and evaluate their own learning (Craft, 2010).
- The three characteristics which have received the most attention in the literature are adults' need for the acknowledgement and use of their experiences and prior knowledge; the differing ways they go about learning; and their desire to be actively involved in the learning process versus being passive recipients of knowledge. Since all employees are adults, it would be beneficial to conduct ethics training that is active rather than passive in nature (Craft, 2010).

Because values are socially constructed and may differ depending on upbringing, environment, religious beliefs, etc. it is a good idea to consider using a hands-on tool for EDM rather than trying to change people's values. Lifeworks Values' Based Decision-Making model as an example of a non-profit that created a tool for values-based decision making in their organization.

Values-based decision-making model (Lifeworks, Inc.) Craft, 2016

- Ethical – does this decision show personal honesty? Demonstrate our mission? Follow our code of ethics?
- Respectful – does this decision treat people with dignity? See people as worthy of having the best? Promote win/win situations?
- Responsive – does this decision provide information and opportunities to make choices? Demonstrate respect for people's ideas and choices? Identify expectations and deliver on commitments?
- Resourceful – does this decision use our resources to support, not replace other resources? Use resources wisely?

Ethics Tests as tools for EDM

- Test of common sense or the "smell test" – if a proposed course of action stinks, don't do it
- Test of one's best self – is this action or decision I'm getting ready to take compatible with my concept of myself at my best?

- Test of making something public – how would I feel if others knew I was doing this? Front of the newspaper test.
- Test of ventilation – expose your proposed action or decision to others and get their thoughts on it before acting.
- Test of purified idea – an idea or action might be thought to be “purified” that is, cleansed or made acceptable – when a person with authority says or implies it is appropriate.
- Test of the big four – four characteristics of decision making that may lead you astray or toward an unethical course of action. The four are greed, speed, laziness, and haziness. Greed – drive to acquire more and more in self-interest. Speed is the tendency to rush, cut corners because under pressure for time. Laziness leads you to take the easy course of action that requires the least amount of effort. Haziness - act or react without a clear idea of what is going on.
- Gag test – clearest signal that a dubious decision or action is going too far is when you simply “gag” at the prospect of carrying it out.

Where we started: Rest’s (1986) Model of EDM

- Awareness – identification of the ethical dilemma
- Judgment – application of moral judgment. discerning
- Intent – resolve to place moral concerns over other concerns
- Behavior – act on moral concerns

Expanded theory: Jones’ (1991) Moral Intensity

Complicates each aspect of Rest’s model. Most applicable to real-life situations. It’s how we perceive these pieces of Jones that makes it complicated.

- Magnitude of consequences – the sum of the harm or benefit of the moral act to those involved
- Social consensus – the degree of social agreement that a proposed act is good or bad
- Probability of effect – the probability the act will actually take place and will harm or benefit those involved
- Temporal immediacy – length of time between the present and the act
- Proximity – the feeling of immediacy to those involved
- Concentration of effect – strength of consequences to those involved (how many people will be harmed or benefitted)

Casali & Perano (2021) – 30 years of EDM research

- Four highly researched and significant influential factors in individual EDM
 1. Sex – most researched factor - studies have shown females to be more ethical overall
 2. Age – the older one is, the more they tend to make better ethical decisions
 3. Education/employment – more education and more time on the job usually correlates with better ethical decisions
 4. Nationality – one’s culture and its influences plays a large part in how ethical decisions are made

Craft & Shannon (in press 2024) 2012-2022 update

- Research going forward, grounded in these two models, should use demographics as control and is starting to explore more complex areas and groupings.
- New categories with emerging research
 - Immigrant background – those without an immigrant background showed higher levels of ethical judgment (Germany) (Pohling et al., 2016).

- Upbringing (very strict, strict, not too strict) had significant influence on one's EDM process (Oboh, 2019). Strict and very strict were more ethically aware and predisposed in making ethical judgments. (Nigeria)
- Communication methods negative tone and its impact was studied in terms of CEO violent rhetoric. CEOs could have significant influence on the willingness of employees to engage in unethical behavior, but whether the CEO was an employee's own, or a competitor, mattered. The use of violent rhetoric by a competitor CEO increases employees' willingness to act unethically while the use of violent rhetoric by an employee's own CEO decreased it (Gubler et al, 2015).
- Power values—the importance of being in control, having prestige, and having resources negatively impacted ethical decision-making. (Parks-Leduc et al., 2021; Parks & Guay, 2009; Schwartz, 1992).
- Fantasy was correlated with moral judgment and discourse competence (correctly interpreting and inferring relevant information beyond sentence and word context) perhaps because fantasizing about movie characters and books may correlate with openness to change values (Pohling et al., 2016).

Wrap up

- Ethics training in the military, specifically, should be both deliberate and formal (Robinson, 2007). “A reliance on the social system of ethical osmosis to integrate new members into the armed services is unreliable and inconsistent” (Craft, 2010, p. 600).
- In any organization, when there's no order to follow, no manager to listen to, subordinates must be able to reason through an ethical decision. When there's no supervisor present, individuals must be prepared to act on their own either now or in the future.

Resources for further reading

- Casali, G.L. & Perano, M. (2021) Forty years of research on factors influencing ethical decision making: Establishing a future research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 614-630.
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