

Ethical Decision-Making Framework and Guidelines

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Ethical leaders respond with wisdom and objectivity when faced with large decisions. Answer this simple 'test' for ethical decision-making to assess your process, review the guidelines, and follow the framework to help make tough decisions.

1. Transparency: Am I happy to make my decision public, especially to the people affected by it?
2. Effect: Have I fully considered the harmful effects of my decision and how to avoid them?
3. Fairness: Would my decision be considered fair by everyone affected by it (consider all stakeholders as the effects of decisions can be far-reaching).

If you can honestly answer 'yes' to each of the above questions, then you are likely to make an ethical decision. If you have any doubt about saying 'yes' to any of the questions then you should think about things more carefully – there may be a different (and better) solution available to you. If you cannot decide how to answer these questions, seek input from someone you respect who has strong ethical principles.

Follow these guidelines when you are facing a difficult decision that has ethical implications.

1. Step back from every decision before you make it and look at it objectively. Do not be swept along by excitement and urgency. Aim for objectivity and fairness rather than for personal power, 'winning', strategic plotting, high drama, etc.
2. Strive for fairness rather than polarized 'winner takes all' outcomes. Facilitate solutions rather than actually deciding and imposing decisions (unless all parties are happy for you to do so).
3. Learn from history and previous situations. Reviewing how earlier situations were handled reduces the risks of repeating mistakes.
4. Get the facts from all possible perspectives. Often a challenging issue offers three main options:
 - your instinctive or personal view
 - a main alternative option
 - doing nothing (while doing nothing in times of real emergency can be disastrous, in many situations doing nothing can be a viable option).

5. Understand the long-term consequences. Model or brainstorm the 'what if' scenarios. Again, look at previous examples and history.
6. Check the law to determine if there are any legal implications.
7. Consult widely with a variety of people. Go beyond your close circle of advisors, colleagues, friends, etc. Consult people affected by the situation and any potential decisions. If using a survey, ensure the questions are balanced, objective and properly worded.
8. Consider cause and effect in the deepest possible sense. The community is an interconnected system; decisions will affect many people and different aspects of life, now and into the future.
9. Stay humble. Many unethical decisions are borne of arrogance and delusion.
10. Beware of justifying professional decisions according to religious belief systems. There are various risks in leaning too heavily on a religious system of faith when making serious decisions.
11. Aim for solutions based on harmony and objectivity. Facilitate rather than influence. Diffuse conflict situations by finding common ground.

Making good and ethical decisions requires sensitivity and a structured method. Having a method for ethical decision-making is essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that it is worked through automatically without consulting the specific steps.

The more novel and difficult the ethical choice we face, the more we need to rely on discussion and dialogue with others about the dilemma. Only by careful exploration of the problem, aided by the insights and different perspectives of others, can we make good ethical choices in such situations.

Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

1. Recognize an Ethical Issue
 - Could this decision or situation be damaging to an individual or a group? Does this decision involve a choice between a good and bad alternative?
 - Is this issue about more than what is legal or what is most efficient? If so, how?
2. Get the Facts
 - What are the relevant facts of the case? What facts are not known? Can I learn more about the situation? Do I know enough to make an ethical decision?
 - What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Are some concerns more important? Why?
 - What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant individuals and groups been consulted? Have I identified creative options?
3. Evaluate Alternative Actions
 - Evaluate the options by asking the following questions:
 - Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm?
 - Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake?
 - Which option treats people equally or fairly?

- Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some of its members?
 - Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be?
4. Make a Decision and Test It
 - Considering all these approaches, which option best addresses the situation?
 - If I told someone I respect which option I have chosen, what would they say?
 5. Act and Reflect on the Outcome
 - How can my decision be implemented with the greatest care and attention to the concerns of all stakeholders?
 - How did my decision turn out and what have I learned from this specific situation?

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