

Ethical decision-making

When faced with an ethical dilemma, the following questions can help you start resolving it. Note that there is no guarantee that, by asking these questions, you will generate an answer that everyone will agree is ethically correct. Whatever you decide, probably someone else will have a different answer. Although it is unlikely that you can get a resolution, with which everyone will agree, it is possible to use *a decision-making process that everyone agrees is honest, competent, and transparent*.

Of course, the detail and complexity with which such questions are explored is the difference between successful and credible ethical reflection and an exercise in mere 'box-ticking.'

1. *What are the relevant facts?*
2. *What assumptions am I making?*
3. *Which of my personal beliefs make the facts significant?*
4. *Would I be happy if my family/friends knew what I'd done? Would I be happy for this decision to be in the media?*

This *Sunlight Test* asks you to imagine how you would feel if the decision were to be exposed to (and questioned in) the full light of public scrutiny. More importantly, how would you feel if the people you most admire knew about the proposed course of action? Of course, this test has its weaknesses. In particular, suppose someone especially admires the opinion of scoundrels. A member of an organised crime gang, for example, may derive particular respect for engaging in especially heinous behaviour. More realistically, people in business might belong to an organisation that celebrates an ethos of winning at all costs, irrespective of the damage done to others. It all depends on the nature of the people from whom positive reinforcement is sought.

5. *What will this proposed course of action do to my character or the character of my organisation?*

Many people argue that our decisions help to shape our character and vice versa. That is, we cannot lie and cheat without somehow becoming a fraudulent liar. For example, this is one of the reasons often cited when advising against paying bribes. Once such practice becomes habitual, it may be difficult to prevent the underlying attitudes and principles from spreading throughout the organisation. After all, if it works in one place and time, then why not try it everywhere?

6. *What would happen if everybody took this course of action?*

Would you be happy if your proposed course of action became the rule for everyone? (This is essentially applying Kant's criterion.) If not, then what makes you so special that you can do it? Most frameworks for ethical decision-making assume that the right decision for one person is right for everybody in the same position.

7. *How would I like it if someone did this to me? How would I feel if my actions were to impact upon my child? parent?*

This is, of course, a variation on the *Golden Rule*. Some argue that there is, sometimes, a duty to treat people in a way better than you would expect for yourself, but, at a basic level, that you would not like the same thing to happen to you may suffice to cause you to pause and think again.

8. *Will the proposed course of action bring about a good result? for whom? Have I considered the possibility that the ends may not justify the means?*

Many people naturally judge the ethical status of an action according to its consequences. However, how do we decide that a particular outcome is ‘good?’ Some things are forbidden no matter how good the outcome might seem to be. For example, can you cold-bloodedly kill one innocent individual for the good of ten others?

9. *Is the proposed course of action consistent with my stated values and principles?*

Many people (and organisations) are happy to tell you what they stand for. Unfortunately, what they practise is not always consistent with what they ‘preach.’ This gap between word and deed is one of the more powerful sources of cynicism in the world.

10. *Have I really thought through the issues? What are the weaknesses in my position?*

These 10 questions are based on resources of St James Ethics Centre; much verbatim.

www.ethics.org.au/about-ethics/what-is-ethics/ethical-decision-making.html

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Note that St James Ethics Centre provides a free and confidential service (‘Ethi-call’) for anyone who is facing an ethical dilemma. [tel 1800 672 303]

Here are two other questions worth asking.

11. *Will I still think the same things are most important in 10 years time? on my deathbed?*

Generally people agree that what is truly important in an ethical sense does not change over time. It is easy to be emotionally caught up in a short-term objective that will have little meaning in the longer term.

12. *Am I dealing fairly with an unrepresented stakeholder? Whose perspective have I ignored?*

This may be a person who is not present, a group whose voice is not heard, or part of the natural environment. Most ethical theories support the importance of respecting those who cannot or are prevented from speaking for themselves. It also means you are less likely to get trapped in ‘group-think.’ How you treat those absent also shows how you might treat those present, if they were not there.