# Moral Dilemmas at the WorkPlace: Basic Ideas in Business Ethics

**Business ethics** is the branch of applied ethics that studies the moral norms of the business world, or of commercial activity more generally. In very general terms, businesses trade goods and services with a goal of turning a profit. This, in turn, gives rise to an important moral goal for employees: when working, they should aim to increase the business’s profits, and not merely to benefit themselves. However, profits are not the ONLY thing that matters morally in business, and there are times that pursuing profits can conflict with other morally important goals. For example, it is plausible that business employees, managers, and owners *also* have to consider the impact of their activities on customers, other employees, the community at large, and even the environment. These sorts of conflicts can lead to **moral dilemmas**, in which there are morally important reasons for doing some action AND morally important reasons against doing it. It is important to distinguish moral dilemmas from **practical dilemmas,** in which it is perfectly clear what one morally ought to do, but this conflicts with self-interest. So, for example, a cashier’s choice whether or not to steal money from a cash register when no one is looking might be a practical dilemma, but it certainly isn’t a moral one. By contrast, a cashier’s decision whether to refund money to a customer in a case where the guidelines are unclear (or even where they may prohibit refunding the money) may qualify, depending on the situation.

Much of this class will be concerned with just these sorts of moral dilemmas. In this lecture, we’ll get started by taking a look at some relatively common moral dilemmas that arise at work, and briefly consider how thinking through these things can help us make better decisions.

## Are We Asking Too Much? The costs of Emotional Labor

There are a variety of goods and services that society has decided we simply *won’t allow* people to sell (i.e., we have decided that these goods/services are not **commodities**). So, for example, you can’t engage in prostitution, sell yourself into slavery, sell your kidney for money, or take money for participating in highly dangerous medical experiments. The main reason for this seems to be a worry that these sorts of “jobs” are highly exploitative, and they force people to give up something highly important to their emotional or physical well-being. By contrast, there are many other jobs—accountant, teacher, salesperson—which we think it is perfectly fine to do for money.

One moral dilemma concerns the case what Arlie Hochshild calls **emotional labor,** which requires employees to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…this kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor and integral to our individuality” (*The Managed Heart*). Hochshild gives the example of flight attendants, whose job requires them to (appear to be) happy and friendly at all times, in order to make the passenger’s flight more pleasant. However, this sort of work plays a role in many service industry jobs, such as waiting tables at a restaurant or staffing a customer-service desk. Studies have repeatedly suggested that “faking” emotions in this way bleeds into employees’ personal life, in both positive and negative ways. So, some employees (at some jobs) may find these sort of work satisfying, but others may “burn out” at higher rates, and even find it more difficult to regulate their emotions in their private life (which can have negative effects on their relationships).

Figure In the movie "Office Space," the demand that employees "wear more flair" is an example of emotional labor.

**So what’s the problem?** While it would be impossible (and undesirable) to entirely eliminate certain jobs’ demand for emotional labor, it’s important to remember that it *is* a type of work. The “invisibility” of emotional labor can sometimes mislead managers or customers into thinking it comes for “free” (“it doesn’t cost anything to smile…”). However, just because you can’t immediately *see* the costs to the employee does not mean that they aren’t there. So, for example, emotional labor is plausibly much more costly and difficult for some people (those struggling with depression, or who have recently experienced a loss or trauma) than it is for others. Putting *too* much emphasis on the “emotional labor” aspect of jobs can significantly harm these people, who are already struggling. There is also good reason to think that emotional labor falls more heavily on women than on men *even when they are working the same job.* So, for example, a variety of studies have suggested that female physicians, teachers, and business executives are expected to undertake emotional labor (“empathizing” with people, not showing anger) that their male colleagues are not. For these women, there is a very real sense in which they must “do more” in order to keep up and advance in their careers. Similar demands may exist for members of ethnic or religious minorities who (in order to succeed at work), often have to “grin and bear it” when confronted with instances of racism.

## Being Mean at the Office: Workplace Bullying

While explicit physical (or even verbal) aggression is relatively rare at most workplaces, **workplace bullying** is nevertheless a major problem. Workplace bullying often involves actions that seem minor (and perfectly legal) when considered in isolation, but can cause serious harm to both physical and mental health when they are repeated for months or years (often by multiple offenders). Rayner et al (2001) identify five broad categories of workplace bullying:

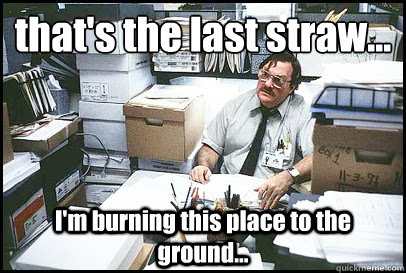
* **Threats to professional status—**Workplace bullies often make use of both official and unofficial methods to undermine the victim’s status at work. This might include false or incomplete reports to supervisors, malicious gossip, belittling comments at meetings, and similar things.

Figure Melvin (from Office Space) is repeatedly subjected to workplace bullying, as his boss takes his favorite stapler, makes him work alone in the storage room, and assigns him unpleasant tasks (and denies him cake).

* **Threats to personal standing—**Just like schoolyard bullies, workplace bullies may assign victims unwelcome nicknames, yell at them, make them the butt of jokes, make disparaging comments about their race/religion/appearance/etc.
* **Isolation—**One frequent method of bullying involves *isolating* the victim from other coworkers, both socially and professionally. The victim may be consistently left off committees or workgroups, not invited to social events, etc. Their attempts to contribute to group projects, or to foster workplace relationships, are consistently ignored or overlooked.
* **Overwork—**Supervisors or managers engage in bullying when they consciously “set up an employee to fail” by assigning too much work, or give them projects for which they have inadequate training, preparation, or support.
* **Destabilization—**Closely related to the previous point, destabilization directly attacks the employee to “own” their work by removing responsibilities, assigning them to meaningless “busy work”, or giving credit for their work to others.

**What’s the dilemma?** Workplace bullying is obviously morally wrong, and the **culture of fear** bullies create often harms not only their intended victim(s), but the business more generally. A more difficult question considers the moral obligations of *bystanders.* Since workplace bullies frequently follow the “letter” of the rules (and because they often choose victims who are relatively unpopular to begin with), it is tempting for managers and coworkers to think that either (1) the victim is exaggerating the harm (after all, any individual instance of bullying may appear pretty minor) or (2) even if the victim is NOT exaggerating, there is simply nothing to be done. However, there is little reason to think that this is *true—*workplace bullying can be addressed (at least to some degree) directly by managers, human resource staff, and union leaders, and indirectly by coworkers (who at the very least can provide emotional support to victims they might not be great friends with).

## Other Issues: What do Employers “Owe” employees?

 **Is There a Moral “Right” to Continued Employability?** Today’s workers are much more likely than their parents or grandparents to have a **boundaryless career** that involves working at a number of businesses and organizations (as opposed to staying in one place for their whole career). While part of this no doubt reflects employees’ own choices (and their desire to change careers or move to a new location), it is also due (in large part) to the fact that employers are much more likely to eliminate or relocate jobs than they were in years in past, and any particular job may cease to exist. Most statistics suggest that this shift has, in general, been much more beneficial for businesses (whose profits are up) and for upper-level management (whose wages have skyrocketed) than for middle-class workers (who lifetime earnings have been stagnant or declining). While no one (or almost no one) thinks that businesses have an obligation to employee people for life, some people (such Harry Burren III) have suggested that businesses DO have an obligation to provide time/money for professional development opportunities that do NOT directly relate to the employee’s role with the company. This might come in a variety of forms—time off for sabbatical leave (to pursue personal projects), money for college classes, time off to attend professional conferences where the person can network, and so on. The basic idea is a fairly simple one: since most businesses cannot realistically promise their employees a “job for life” (no matter how well they perform), they should respect their employees’ **right to continued employability** by making sure the employees are given the support necessary for getting their *next* job. Like the earlier issues discussed, there is no hard-and-fast rule how this might be done, but this vagueness doesn’t mean that doing nothing is OK.

**Do Employees Have Any Rights to “Free Speech”?** While federal law protects *some* rights to employee speech (such as that relating to religion, union membership, or whistleblowing), the exact limits vary quite a bit. In some states, it is perfectly legal for employers to fire employees for political opinions (even if this is simply a bumper sticker on the employee’s car), the things employees say on social media, or to require employees to donate to a political party/candidate of the boss’s choice. In nearly every state, employees can be fired for disagreeing with their boss, even if they were in the “right” about whatever the issue happened to be. There are good moral reasons, however, for businesses to protect their employees right to free speech, at least to a certain extent. Besides cultivating employee morale, a workplace culture that values free speech will find it much easier to come up with the new ideas, and to see the problems with existing ways of doing things. This moral right to free speech must balanced, however, to ensure that employee speech does not harm either the business (insulting customers, etc.) or their coworkers (see the discussion of bullying above).

**Is Hiring Based on Physical Appearance Morally OK?** Studies have consistently found that tall, attractive, normal-weight people make *significantly* more money than do their short, less attractive, overweight peers. This may be because they are more likely to be hired for jobs, because they are more likely to be promoted once they have them, or (likely) both of these things. From a business’s perspective, this might (sometimes) make economic “sense”—after all, customers often *like* interacting with attractive employees, and (some) employees may simply be more willing to take orders from a good-looking manager than from a not-so-good-looking one. (In other cases, however, businesses are simply harming themselves with their preferences for attractive hires.) However, this same thing is plausibly true in the case of gender, race, and class—there are undeniably some customers/employees who strongly prefer to be around people “who look like them.” As a society, however, we’ve come to think that businesses are NOT allowed to discriminate in this way, even if doing so would maximize their own profits. The question now becomes: Is it morally OK to consider physical appearance in hiring/promotion? If so, when? If not, why not?

## Review Questions

1. Give an example of a moral dilemma in the workplace. This might be something that happened to you, something you witnessed or heard about, or merely something you read about. After describing the situation, explain *why* this was a moral dilemma, and say you think it *ought* to have been handled. If this differs from how it was handled, explain why you prefer your solution.
2. Suppose that you were the owner, general manager, or CEO of a small business (if you’d like, you can choose a current or past employer). What sorts of *specific* measures might you take to address the issues discussed above (emotional labor, workplace bullying, continued employability, physical-appearance discrimination, free speech). Remember that these should be things that you realistically can do (i.e., you probably can’t afford college tuition for all of them).
3. In the United States, many wait staff receive the majority of their wages in the form of tips from customers. In many states, this is officially recognized by law, and the restaurants employing these staff are exempt from paying them the minimum wage. Given this reality, how do you do think customers *should* decide how much to tip? To what extent (if any) should things like “emotional labor” (smiling, chit-chat) play a role? What about physical appearance, or a customer’s knowledge of the employee’s political opinions? Is tipping at or near the standard rate a **supererogatory** action (nice, but not be required) or is it **morally obligatory?** Please explain and defend your answer.

## For Further Reading

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