

Ethical Decision Making: How to Make Ethical Decisions in 5 Steps

By Lyndsay Swinton

What is ethical? Decision making can be hard enough but when we have to consider ethics and decision making we can tie ourselves up so tight we stop making decisions entirely. Here is a short guide to help you through the ethics maze and make effective decisions.

Consider this - is it ethical that CEO's get paid salaries hundreds of times greater than their most junior employees? You could argue a CEO contributes more to the overall wealth and health of the company and should be appropriately rewarded, however, others may say it is an unfair, indefensible abuse of power. I guess your answer depends how far up the management food chain you are!

Ethical decision making affects more than our working life. What are you wearing today? Do you know the working conditions of the person who made it? Are you happy with that? And that cup of coffee you had at breakfast - who made the biggest buck from your purchase?

Here is a short guide to help you think through ethical issues and make effective decisions.

1. Is it an ethical issue?

Being ethical does not always mean following the law. And just because something is possible doesn't mean it is ethical, hence the global debates about bio-technology advances such as cloning. And ethics and religion do not always concur.

This is perhaps the trickiest stage in ethical decision making, as sometimes the subtleties of the issue are above and beyond our knowledge and experience. Listen to your instincts - if it feels uncomfortable making the decision on your own, get others involved and use their collective knowledge and experience to make a more considered decision.

2. Get the facts

What do you know, and just as importantly, what don't you know? Who are the people affected by your decision? Have they been consulted? What are your options? Have you reviewed your options with someone you respect?

3. Evaluate alternative actions

There are different ethical approaches which may help you make the most ethical decision.

- a. Utilitarian Approach - which action results in the most good and least harm?
- b. Rights Based Approach - which action respects the rights of everyone involved?
- c. Fairness or Justice Approach- which action treats people fairly?
- d. Common Good Approach - which action contributes most to the quality of life of the people affected?
- e. Virtue Approach - which action embodies the character strengths you value?

4. Test your decision

Could you comfortably explain your decision to your mother? To the man in the street? On television? If not, you may have to re-think your decision before you take action.

5. Just Do It - but what did you learn?

Once you've made the decision, then don't waste time in implementing it. Set a date to review your decision and make adjustments if necessary. Often decisions are made with the best information to hand at the time, but things change, and your decision making needs to be flexible enough to change too. Even a complete about face may be the most appropriate action further down the track.

Ethical decision making is a tricky business, but you can make more palatable, workable decisions if you follow these 5 simple steps.

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