

Making Ethical Decisions

How does one make a well-reasoned response to an ethical dilemma?

1. Identify and address the issues and points of ethical conflict.

Move beyond naming the issue (eg, plagiarism, data access, honesty), to the nature of the conflict. What principles are in conflict? What is the choice between?

2. Identify all of the interested parties, and what their interests are.

Start with those directly mentioned in the case and move outward as needed, to people in the same institution, to the larger community, to society in general.

3. Consider the duties or obligations of the protagonist.

What are the responsibilities that the protagonist should live up to, and why? What values, principal inform those responsibilities?

4. Develop list of options

Be imaginative, try to avoid simply “yes” or “no,” but be specific. What to say? Who to tell? When? How?

5. Recognize and consider the specific consequences of acting in the various ways to all the interested parties.

There are probably several possible outcomes of each option; what are they, and how would the interested parties be affected by each? The following tests could be considered.

- Harm Test: Does this option do less harm than alternatives?
- Publicity Test: Would I want my choice of this option published in the newspaper?
- Defensibility Test: Could I defend choice of option before an adversarial committee?
- Reversibility Test: Would I still think choice of this option good if I were adversely affected?
- Colleague Test: What do my colleagues say when I describe my problem and suggest this option?
- Professional Test: What might my profession’s governing body for ethics committee say?
- Organization Test: What does the company’s ethics officer or legal counsel say about this?

What are the points of ethical conflict?

Who are the parties and what are their interests?

What are the obligations of the protagonist?

What are some options?

What are the consequences of these options to the parties?

Name: _____

Tell me something interesting or new you learned today about making ethical decisions.
Thanks.
