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how to make unethical decisions

Andrew Sikula, Sr. & John Sikula

People make decisions and solve problems in a variety of ways. Oftentimes, little if any thought goes into choice selection. Sometimes, even very important decisions are made without serious contemplation of potential alternatives and their consequences. Many different tools/techniques and rationales are utilized in problem solving and decision making with little or no regard to ethical judgment and/or aftermaths. Some ways of making choices are worse than others when using pity parameters. This article discusses commonly used but ethically unsound methods of making selections. Later in the writing, appropriate standards and benchmarks for determining ethical action will be presented.

Unlawful Discrimination

For starters, we can begin by recognizing that all forms of illegal discrimination involve unethical

decisions. In general, all unlawful acts are also unethical activities. There are some exceptions to this statement, such as the homeless sleeping in public parks, but such examples and exceptions go beyond the main emphasis of this writing. Later in this article the authors will discuss the fact that legality and morality are not identical. For openers, however, please recognize that personal and personnel employment discrimination in decision making based upon human characteristics of race, color, creed, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, and/or disability is both unlawful and unethical. More debatable for example, is whether nepotism, that is, giving hiring, promotion and pay preferences to relatives, is legal and/or moral. In most settings, nepotism is legal, although it may violate company policy especially if direct supervision is involved. However, most ethic experts consider

nepotism to be immoral because it violates the ethical principles of human fairness, justice, and equal employment opportunity.

Unsophisticated Decision Making Tools & Techniques

Sometimes silly and senseless methods are used to pick among available alternatives. If you want to make unethical decisions, frequently use such popular games as: enee, meenie, minee, mo; pick a number; rock, paper, scissors; and drawing straws. Just as bad ethically but much more frequently used are the ten determination discriminators listed below:

1. Flipping a coin
2. Crystal ball
3. Spinning a wheel
4. Cutting a deck of cards
5. Reading tea leaves, Tarot cards, palms, head bumps, etc.
6. Ouija board

7. Farmer's Almanac
8. Astrology/horoscopes
9. Sorcery/witchcraft
10. Doing nothing and/or relying on past practices

These ten techniques do not need much additional explanation because we all know what they mean and what they involve. As formally trained educators, the authors are amazed as to the frequency with which people admit to relying on such methods, even in very important matters. It should go without saying, but we will nonetheless here state, that ethical excellence and moral management cannot be achieved by utilizing these methods.

Many people are immobilized by difficult decisions. They procrastinate indefinitely, do nothing, and let the chips fall where they may. They may allow others to make decisions for them, or rely on game-like decision making techniques to avoid stress. Such individuals relinquish their free will, which is mankind's most valued asset. Unfortunately, this can then lead to a victim or entitlement mentality where one sees an organization as a villain or enemy causing personal harm or loss to oneself which, they think, preferably can be remedied only by litigation.

Regarding past practices, many people think that it is safe to simply rely on the past and to repeat the same decision(s) made previously. It worked once and might work again. This is a dangerous tactic/strategy because

nothing in life is as certain as change. People change, circumstances vary, and timing needs to be adjusted. Making identical decisions and doing things the same way year after year can lead to failure much of the time. It is also boring.

Commonly Used Choice Rationales

Much more complicated and controversial than the previous ten decision techniques are another set of rationalizations used by human beings to justify their choices. These solutions involve cognitions and are much more difficult to recognize as improper preference parameters. It takes serious study and often data-based research findings to convince someone that the following ten rationales are unreliable and anti-intellectual guides for determining or interpreting past, present and/or future ethical behaviors. This is because one's ego and personality are involved, and stating that such directors are not sound ethical indicators is often viewed as a personal attack on one's character and/or integrity. But, after each of the authors having spent over 45 years in higher education, we are convinced, and data-based research supports, that the following rationales are not reliable or sound ethical pointers.

1. First impressions
2. Common sense
3. Feelings
4. Instincts

5. Gut reaction
6. Human nature
7. Groupthink
8. Everyone's doing it
9. Self-interest
10. Conscience

Several items on this list may surprise and/or offend the reader. Additional explanation is needed to clarify these listing inclusions. Abundant research is available proving that first impressions are just as likely to be wrong as right. Common sense is neither common nor sensical. If common sense existed, individuals and institutions would not be having so much difficulty making proper choices. Human feelings, personal instincts, and individual gut reactions are all individually and collectively poor decision determinants. None can withstand the scrutiny of the scientific method when tested empirically. Sometimes the first five items of this ten-item listing are recognized as being poor ways for others to make decisions. However, to recognize that these five mistakes pertain also to ourselves, is a much more difficult acknowledgement. Seeing faults in others is easy. Recognizing these same deficiencies in ourselves is at least tenfold as challenging.

The next three listed items are collective rather than individual in character. Some people trick themselves into believing that it is human nature to be ethical and to do right and proper things. The opposite is true. Believers

accept the concept of original sin where mankind is viewed as sinners in need of repentance. For generations now, schools and colleges, buying into Adam Smith historically and Milton Friedman et al. presently, have taught that each and every person pursuing their own self-interest will lead to the greater good of corporations, society and the world as a whole. But contrary to popular opinion, greed is not good. And what is best for an individual is not always best for a community. In a free market economy this might be true in theory, but it is a falsehood in actual global practice. Perfect markets assume the free flow of information, goods, services, money and personnel - none of which happens in the real world. Because absolute power corrupts people absolutely, governments have a legitimate role to play in society, and these governments operate ethically best when they are limited and democratic rather than expansive and autocratic in oversight and rule. Self-interest is a justification that needs to be risen above. Higher order decision making requires one to put aside self-interest for the good of a larger group or calling. Needless to say, this is difficult, and it is a very hard lesson to teach and to learn.

Just because a group thinks some way, or everyone seems to be acting in a certain manner, does not constitute ethical behavior. John Gardner has warned us that "the moral majority is neither." The majority of people may not act morally. Laws represent

majority opinion, but not always morality reasoning. Laws change over time and geography. Prostitution and gambling are legal in some states but not others. Slavery and polygamy laws have changed over time in different countries and settings. Legality is not morality. Morality is a higher calling and often runs counter to groupthink and community sentiment.

The most difficult truism to buy into from this listing is the fact that your conscience may not always be a proper guide to ethical behavior. A conscience is acquired over time. It is not inherited or part of one's chromosomes or DNA. The conscience is developed over time through education and experience. Some people have learned unethical behavior and they suffer from negative past happenings. A person may have no conscience, or possess one deranged by evil. The conscience is the best ethical guide from the previously listed ten commonly used choice rationales, but it is not a perfect guidance system.

So far we have discussed "How To Make Unethical Decisions" using "Unsophisticated Decision Making Tools and Techniques," and by utilizing "Commonly Used Choice Rationales." If these methodologies do not produce ethical decisions and behaviors, what means can we use to improve and enhance ethical actions?

Appropriate Guides For Determining Ethical Actions

No guidance system is perfect because human misinterpretations of advice can always happen. Given that there may be some human communication problems and limitations, nonetheless, the authors offer the following ten ethical guidance suggestions:

1. Scripture
2. Prayer
3. Learned knowledge
4. Formal education
5. Innate intelligence/wisdom
6. Past experience
7. Correct consultation
8. Meritorious mentoring
9. Positive role modeling
10. Pooled judgment

One of the problems with decision games, tools, and rationales is that they tend to be implemented very quickly or over a very short period of time. Appropriate ethical guidance systems, on the other hand, involve thought, reflection and/or observation often covering months or years of time. Ethical decisions are not made instantaneously. Moral management is a process involving deliberative thought and action. Ethical excellence is achieved by using virtuous values as benchmark standards. These benchmarks provide direction to appropriate behavior.

Although not discussed much in the management and supervision literature, it is an undisputable fact

that people use prayer, meditation and/or reflection before making major personal and professional decisions. Scripture, the Bible, and/or the Words of God and Jesus are studied and implemented by Christian decision makers. Other faiths use other sources which they believe provide divine inspiration and guidance.

Human beings also have innate intelligence, learned knowledge, and formal education upon which they rely to help them choose proper alternative actions. Wisdom is developed over time and often comes from the school of hard knocks, past experiences, former failures, and/or selective success stories.

Ethical choices may often result from following the trusted advice of persons with highly developed individual integrity and personal character. The open scrutiny of others, (be it your parents, children, news reporters, et al.), often helps to purify chosen options. This scrutiny, openness, and/or transparency can come from a variety of ethical expert sources including consultants, mentors, and role models. These outsiders must be "correct," "meritorious," and "positive." The authors realize that these are value laden terms, but consensus can be reached on each. Advisors must be righteous, virtuous and exemplar if they are to effectively serve as ethics advocates. Never use advisors with questionable reputations. When utilized properly, ethics experts help to ensure that a person assumes both responsibility for

one's behavior, and accountability to others for consequences of individual actions.

Sometimes it is wise to get the counsel of more than one trusted colleague or moral mentor. The best and most ethical decisions can come as a result of the pooled judgment of several monitors. However, it is cautioned here that pooled judgment works best when the consultants number 3-5 in total. Larger groups tend to compromise solutions and average down ethics and decision quality due to groupthink and negotiations. One should not attempt to negotiate between right and wrong. Compromise may be a resolution to a confrontation, but it never results in better ethics and/or a heightened level of integrity.

Conclusion

There are many ways to make unethical decisions. Breaking the law of the land is unethical. Using gamesmanship and quickie tools and techniques also are examples of poor ways to make decisions and to select options. More commonly used are a variety of human rationales which when tested scientifically can prove to be faulty. It is difficult for most people to persistently practice procedural propriety and to exclusively execute ethical excellence. Moral management takes time, tenacity and transparency to implement, but with practice over time, individuals and institutions can learn to replace defective decisions with successful selections. ♣

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