

ETHICAL DECISION- MAKING: GETTING BETTER AT DOING RIGHT

James K. Dittmar

Joanne B. Ciulla, professor and director of the Institute for Ethical Leadership at Rutgers University, wrote in 1995, “Good Leadership is *Ethical Leadership*.” (emphasis mine). Her powerful statement, alone, sets the tone for this article. Unfortunately, we know that “Ethical” leadership is too often less evident than we would expect. In fact, the understanding and application of ethics in our personal and professional lives are some of the most challenging aspects of the human experience. Recent examples, such as the Volkswagen emissions scheme, the college admissions bribery scandal, and the Theranos blood-testing debacle give witness to this enigma—why seemingly “good” people do bad things.

There are many reasons for such shortcomings. Leaders, in particular, may struggle with issues of ego, power, insecurities, conflicts of interest, pressure to produce, etc., all of which can cause them to then rationalize

their bad behavior. From virtue and character flaws to the cognitive biases we have that can affect how we respond to situations that have ethical or moral implications, the question of why we don’t seem to be that great as ethical decision-makers is one that ethicists and practitioners alike have sought to answer. Nevertheless, we can get better when it comes to this critical responsibility we have, especially for leaders.

To address this assertion that we can improve our ability to make quality, ethical decisions, I share a model that I trust will help you in your journey of becoming a better leader by being ethical. I call this model the “3-P’s.” The 3-P’s represent process, perspective, and person. This model helps you develop a systematic and consistent approach to making ethical decisions that can be beneficial. Before I do that, though, here are a few points of reference that set the context for what follows.

First, I use the terms “ethical” and “moral” (and their conjunctive derivatives) interchangeably. Some may distinguish between the two. In this article, both words represent the same concept.

Second, circumstances in which ethical decisions must be made (those that have ethical implications or components), come in a variety of forms. They may include issues surrounding the fiduciary behaviors of organizational leaders and other levels of management/employees. These are the types of unethical behavior and decision-making that capture the news headlines.

In addition, though, unethical leadership occurs every time someone is mistreated through the misuse of power or position. This kind of leadership behavior *is* unethical leadership. The need to change that is as important, if not more so, than curtailing the financial abuses perpetrated by some leaders.

Beneath understanding these two categories of unethical behavior lies the important questions: “How do I know when an ethical situation exists?” or “How do I know when I have to make a decision that has ethical implications?” Essentially, when you encounter a circumstance in which your core moral values conflict with the possible outcomes, you have an ethical situation and, thus, you have to make an ethical decision. In these instances, you have a choice: to do the right thing or ignore it.

Often, you will know a situation has ethical implications from your past experience. Your intuition tells you “something is wrong morally here.” Relying on your gut feeling can often let you know when there’s an ethical problem. I’ll have more to say about recognizing ethical situations when I discuss the concept of the “Person,” the final P in my model.

“How do I know when an ethical situation exists?”

Leadership is a process of influence based on positive relationships with others.

Third, since this article references “leadership,” it is important to make clear what that term represents when I use it. My view of leadership includes two concepts. Number one, leadership is a process of influence based on positive relationships with others. I am indebted to the late University of San Diego leadership studies professor emeritus Joseph C. Rost, whose text, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* I first read in the early 1990s, shortly after it was published. In his book, he defined, in detailed terms, his relationship-focused model of leadership. His framework shaped my view of leadership from that point onward.

Number two, to the best of my ability, I am a firm believer in and practitioner of servant leadership. More than a “model” of leadership, it is a way of life, a perspective or worldview through which we daily think and behave. As our dear friend and exemplar of servant leadership, Frances Hesselbein, is fond of saying, “To Serve is to Live.” Thus, servant leadership becomes the foundation from which we practice the process of leadership as described above. Taken together, practicing this type of leadership is a basis for and enhances our approach to ethical decision-making.

Conversely, leadership that is based on the misuse and abuse of power, position, and authority conflicts with the concept of leadership I describe above as relational and servant oriented and that is the basis for ethical leader behavior. They’re not the type of relational, servant leaders I have in mind when referring to ethical leadership.

Finally, it's important to understand that this model is integrative in nature. By that I mean, each of the P's—process, perspective, and person—interact while addressing an ethical dilemma. It's not a kind of truncated dynamic in which decision-makers go from process to perspective to person. Rather, all three are connected and interact with one another and are designed to function together holistically.

Process

The first P, process, refers to the method of identifying and analyzing the issues related to resolving an ethical dilemma. Below is a straightforward, five-step process that will help you make the best ethical decision you can. Bear in mind that this process isn't necessarily a linear one (Step 1, then Step 2, then Step 3, etc.). You may find yourself circling back to previous steps with new information you discovered when working through the other steps. Here are the five steps I recommend:

1. Identify the ethical dilemma and clearly state it so that everyone understands what it is. What is the problem? Why is it an ethical dilemma? What is the issue at stake?
2. Find out all the relevant facts. Notice the word *relevant*. You need to separate those issues, conditions, actions, people and the like which have no bearing on the dilemma you face from those that do.
3. Begin formulating alternatives or options for actions based on the information you have collected.
4. Evaluate the various courses of actions you have identified and choose the one you believe is the *best* one to address the dilemma based on your ethical values. Make sure to consider those who will be affected by your decision.
5. Implement the action you have chosen. Have a plan. Determine what should be communicated, to whom, when, and where. Be sure to include a follow-up process to assess if indeed your choice was the best one. If you made a mistake, acknowledge it and learn from it. Take corrective action if necessary and when possible.

Find out all the relevant facts.

So why is process important? A step-by-step, rational process makes the challenge of clarifying the issues a bit easier and helps avoid the knee-jerk reaction to an ethical dilemma that can lead to even more problems. This process gives you a chance to step back, set aside your emotions and feelings, take a breath, and focus on the issue(s). By applying a process, the result of your decision will more likely be what you had hoped for, thus, you increase your ability as an effective, ethical decision-maker.

Now this type of process can take *time* to accomplish, and often that becomes the greatest challenge—having the option of working through these steps before acting. Sometimes, you don't have that luxury and must decide what to do immediately, relying much more on intuition and your own experiences. You may have dealt with similar issues in the past and that knowledge can allow you to readily respond. But if the ethical dilemma is unique and novel for you, utilizing a basic process, such as the one I just presented, can increase the probability that your course of action will be the *best* one of the options available.

You may have noticed that in Step 4 of the process you must decide which course of action is the “best” or most ethical. The five-step process helps you sort out what's going on, but it doesn't provide the answer to the question, “What is the right thing to do.” This is the point at which the next “P,” perspective, comes into play.

Perspective

Perspective refers to your personal values, beliefs, and character (virtues) that determine how you will behave,

ethically speaking. Perspective is your “ethical point of view” or framework from which you determine what is right and what is wrong. These are the principles on which you stand when you make ethical decisions.

When considering the concept of perspective, you must answer some key questions. Among them are: What is your ethical point of view? What are the values, beliefs, etc., that define or help determine how you will act? How do you identify or know what you stand for? How do you apply these when addressing an ethical dilemma?

To help you respond to these questions, here are some suggestions. In terms of identifying your perspective, perhaps you never considered what they may be. To get started, put together a short list of those ethical principles or values that are important to you. Think about those people who have been a big influence on your life. Did they instill in you any values that you still carry with you? If so, write them down. If you are stuck, do an online search of ethical values that others have developed. Take a look at them. Develop your own list from what you read. Rank order them. Discuss with others what you are doing and ask them what values and principles are important to them.

You don’t need a full page of values. So, from all of the possibilities, identify three to five that are the nearest and dearest to your heart. Commit to them as your ethical perspective. Ask yourself, *Am I willing to live by these principles no matter what the cost?* Then go from there.

Don’t forget—you need to ensure those with whom you work know what those principles or values are. They need to hear from you that your commitment is both to espouse and consistently live by these principles, no matter what the situation, no matter who sees you, even if no one else is present. They need to know you will also hold them, as well as yourself, accountable to act according to those principles. And, that you expect *them* to hold you accountable. That’s integrity. Yale Law School professor Stephen L. Carter defined integrity as this: Calling out an unethical situation; taking ethical action to correct that situation; and telling those impacted why you took that action.

In other words, “walk the talk” and then explain where you are going. Seth Meyers, noted clinical psychologist and author, describes integrity as “doing the right thing even when it’s not acknowledged by others, or convenient for you.” And, according to author C.S. Lewis, “Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. Integrity is a foundational moral virtue, and the bedrock upon which good character is built.”

The bottom line is this—you cannot complete the *process* of ethical decision-making without having developed a *perspective*. It’s like putting the ethical cart before the horse. It won’t work. You need to think about and clarify the basis upon which you make ethical decisions. Whatever process you use, becoming a better, ethical decision-maker requires the identification of and a commitment to the consistent application of ethical values as you try to determine what is the right thing to do. Then you can complete Step 4 of the process.

Person

Finally, having discussed the importance the first P, process, and the second P, perspective, let’s move on to the final P, the person. The phrase *moral agent* refers to your capacity and ability to *act* morally or ethically. In this case, you take a hard look into the mirror and ask, *Am I able and willing to live out my moral values?*

Let’s examine four components or concepts (borrowing from the model of the late University of Minnesota psychology professor James R. Rest and co-author Darcia Narváez, emerita psychology professor at the University of Notre Dame) that are necessary to take ethical action. These include moral awareness, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral courage. *Moral awareness* means you *recognize* that a moral/ethical situation exists. It requires you to have the *capacity* to realize something is not right, in ethical terms. This is the point at which the process of ethical decision-making begins. In conventional terms, we can associate this with our conscience. If you are morally aware, your conscience senses that *something’s not right here. I have a feeling here, and I need to investigate what it is.* When you do recognize or sense that something’s wrong,

moral judgment comes into play. This quite simply is your *ability* to determine right from wrong. Moral judgment refers again to the concept of values and having an ethical perspective. You judge or determine what is the right thing to do because you have the ethical perspective with which to do so.

Once you've determined what the best course of action is, you've got to have the *moral motivation*. You must be motivated to follow through on the course of action you think is the best one to resolve the ethical dilemma. If your organization doesn't reward ethical behavior, you ask yourself, *Do I really want to do this? Will this affect my job? My relationships with peers? What if I do nothing? Is this really worth it?* You must generate the intrinsic motivation to "do the right thing" regardless of the outcome.

Finally, taking ethical action requires *moral courage*. You may understand what is the right thing to do. However, it's not a decision unless you *do* something.

Moral courage is perhaps the most challenging of the four components of moral action. This is the point in ethical decision-making process where you ask yourself, *Do I have what it takes to carry out this decision?* To answer *yes* to these questions means you have the capability to confront and overcome difficult circumstances. It means making the ethical decision no matter what the consequences. This is where the "ethical rubber meets the road" and it's up to you to make it happen.

Right now, you may be wondering, *Is it possible for me to develop these four components of moral action?* Yes, it is. It takes commitment and some time to grow these capacities. But it *can* be done—I've seen it happen.

To do so, I encourage you to practice the following recommendations:

- Start by looking at situations from an ethical point of view. Ask yourself, "Is there something wrong here?"
- Don't ignore your emotions. Feelings of anger, disgust, guilt, or remorse may reveal to you that you have a problem with something that's happening.

- Seek and be open to the opinions of others beyond your typical circle of peers or friends. Ask them, "Is something wrong here?"
- Develop a sense of empathy by putting yourself in the shoes of those who are directly affected by a situation or your decision.
- Take courses and training in ethics and ethical decision-making.

Find people in your life who are positive, strong moral agents and learn from them.

Conclusion

Thus, these are the "3-P's" of ethical leadership. And, the clarion call for more ethical leadership is palpable. The research is clear; employees across all sectors want their leaders to behave ethically. But, is it possible to develop the capacity among leaders to be more ethical and make better ethical decisions? I believe so and many others who write about, teach and practice ethical leadership do.

During the many times I taught ethics with professional leaders, I witnessed an increase in both the confidence level and ability for them to face significant ethical dilemmas and make the right decisions. Many times, it happened while we were together as they shared the problems that kept them up at night. They said it was impossible for them to ignore them as a result of what we were discussing in class. They felt compelled to do the right thing, regardless of the outcome. The training and application of how to become ethical leaders and better ethical decision-makers effected a positive change in their professional and personal lives.

*Don't ignore
your emotions.*

I trust this article will challenge you to consider this question: Can this be true for me? Perhaps these words can be a catalyst that gets you thinking about what it means to be an ethical leader. Maybe this discussion about ethical decision-making can be helpful in your own development as you continue the journey we call leadership. Who knows? You may one day make *Good Leadership = Ethical Leadership* your equation for success. Hopefully, applying the 3-P's model and becoming a true moral agent will aid you in this life-long ethical endeavor.

© 2021 University of Pittsburgh



Jim Dittmar was the founder and director of the M.S. in organizational leadership program at Geneva College, the first such graduate program in the county at the time. For 30 years, he has taught ethics at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels and in various organizational settings. His recent publications include the chapter “Frances Hesselbein, To Serve is to Live,” in the book Servant Leadership in Action, co-edited by Ken Blanchard and Renee Broadwell, and (as co-author) the books A Leadership Carol and The LEADERS Model: Essential Practices for Today’s Leadership. Jim received his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh and is president of the 3Rivers Leadership Institute.