

Three approaches to decision making help principals make ethical decisions.

Each approach involves gathering data, evaluating the effects of potential decisions, and staying a course of action.

A survey of principals revealed that their instinctive decisions sometimes did not reflect the best course of action.

Resolving ethical dilemmas is no easy task, and there are no ready-made recipes or guidelines to follow. A principal, as a critically thinking individual with a well-thought-out belief system, will be challenged to think on his or her feet when confronting situations that require ethical decision making. Three decision-making best practices—the Rest model, the five principles, and 12 questions—can be applied to almost any situation. Those practices are illustrative, not exhaustive, of the approaches that are feasible. Although the three approaches provide specific factors to keep in mind when making decisions about ethical or moral issues, the following commonsense, but too often overlooked, elements of ethical decision making should be kept in mind:

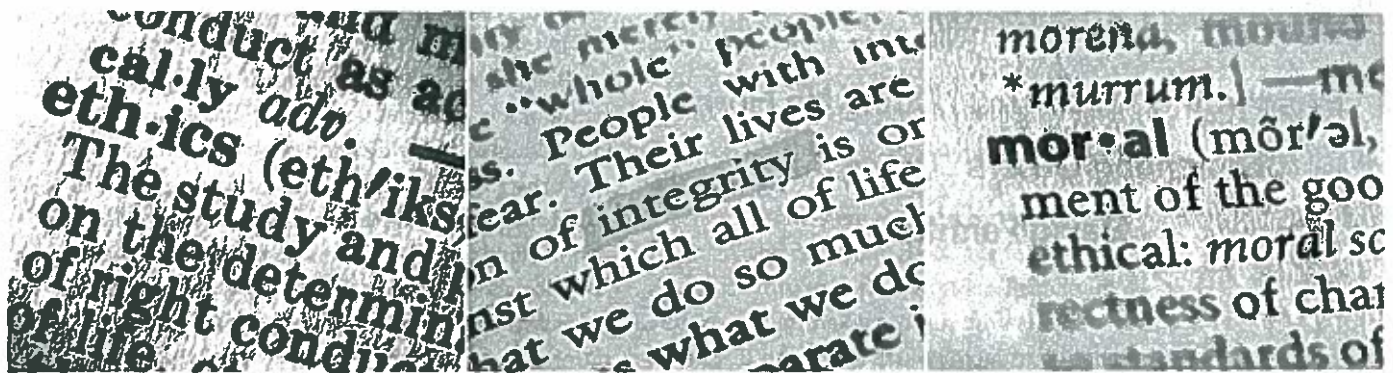
- ▣ Identify the dilemma or issue precisely (e.g., organization versus individual issue).
- ▣ Gather as much data as you can from all perspectives (i.e., seek to

understand the dilemma or issue in all its complexities). This stage may involve interviewing all parties, reviewing school or district policies, and so forth. At this time, take no action.

- ▣ Clarify the issue once you have gathered the data (i.e., get more specific than the first step).
- ▣ Reflect deeply on the issue. Take your time. Seek counsel if possible. Don't rush into a decision. Wait at least one full day for deliberation. Think about the consequences of your decision for all concerned parties, including the school climate and culture.
- ▣ Make the decision decisively.
- ▣ "Live with [the] decision and learn from it" (Maxcy, 2002, p. 154).

The Rest Model

James Rest's practical decision-making model uses four components and is based on "moral reasoning and an ethic of care"



(Komives, Lucas, and McMahon, 1998, p. 265). The Rest model attempts to help people understand and predict moral behavior and decision making. According to Rest, a student of Lawrence Kohlberg, people go through four stages or components when making a decision about an ethical dilemma: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and courage. If a person fails in any one component, then he or she may make a poor decision.

THE MODEL

Component I: moral sensitivity (interpreting the situation as moral):

- Being aware of the situation's moral dimension—that is, that the welfare of another person is at stake
- Recognizing how possible courses of action affect all parties involved

Component II: moral judgment (defining the morally ideal course of action)

- Determining what should be done
- Formulating a plan of action that applies a moral standard or ideal (e.g., justice)

Component III: moral motivation (deciding what to do)

- Evaluating the various courses of action for how they would serve moral or nonmoral values (e.g., political sensitivity, professional aspirations)
- Deciding what to do

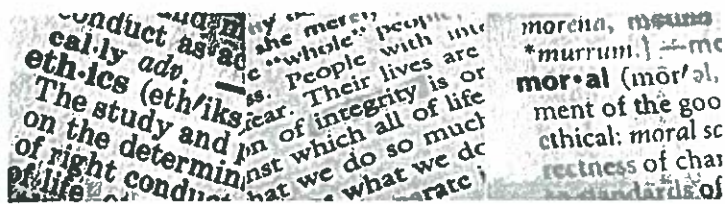
Component IV: moral action (executing and implementing a moral plan of action)

- Acting as one intended to act; following through with the decision, assisted by perseverance, resoluteness, strong character, core values, the strength of one's convictions, and so on

THE SCENARIO

Let's say you, as principal, were confronted by this moral dilemma: You are buddies, personally and socially, with the football coach. His son, who attends your school, is caught cheating by his 12th grade history teacher. School policy and precedent demands that the student be brought before the school's honesty committee. The football coach pleads with you not to send him before the committee because a negative finding would jeopardize his son's scholarship to a prestigious university in the midwest. You have previously reported other students to this committee for similar infractions. Only you and the teacher know about the incident. What would you do?

On the basis of your first component analysis, you realize that this is indeed a moral issue and not something you can simply hide under the rug. You understand the nature of the violation and that other students have been sent before the committee for similar incidents. You also realize



Respecting Autonomy Doing No Harm Benefiting Others Being Just Being Faithful

that your decision will affect the teacher who reported the incident to you. Should you use your authority over this untenured teacher to quell the matter? What impact will your decision have on this teacher? Is it fair to place the teacher in such a situation?

In the second component phase, you pause and consider the morally ideal situation. What would you do if you were not friendly with the boy's father? What have you done in the past? Consider the matter of justice and equity: that is, treating all students fairly in similar situations.

Now you have to decide what to do (component three). Consider what impact your decision will have on the participants, the school, and the community at large. What effect will your decision have on the ethical climate of your school? What message will you be sending if the matter becomes public knowledge?

When developing a course of action (component four), consider what would you do if the information became public knowledge that you allowed the student to slide in this case? How will this decision affect future decisions? Was the decision the morally proper thing to do?

Five Principles of Ethics

Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998) also explained the five principles of ethics highlighted by Beauchamp and Childress (1979): respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful. As a principal, you can "use

these five principles as a critical evaluative approach to moral reasoning and ethical decision-making" (p. 267).

Respecting autonomy: Ethical principals provide stakeholders with the freedom of choice, allowing individuals to freely develop their values and respect the right of others to act independently. But autonomy, like constitutional rights and liberties, has conditions and does not imply unrestricted freedom. A major assumption of autonomy is that an individual possesses a certain level of competence to make rational and informed decisions.

Doing no harm (nonmaleficence): Ethical principals create environments that are free from harm to others, both psychological and physical. Leaders refrain from actions that can harm others.

Benefiting others (beneficence): Ethical principals promote the interests of the school over personal interests and self-gain. The notion of promoting what is good for the whole of the organization or community and promoting the growth of the group is upheld in the principle of beneficence.

Being just (justice): Ethical principals treat people fairly and equally. This principle is traced to Aristotle's work on ethics.

Being faithful (fidelity): Ethical principals keep promises, are faithful, and are loyal to their teachers and school. Being faithful is based on relationships and trust. It is difficult or impossible for others to develop a trusting relationship with someone who violates the principle of fidelity.

Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998) provided the following scenario: You are in charge of the multicultural fair at your school. A subcommittee designed T-shirts that you think may offend certain ethnic groups. Some teachers have already complained about the message on the shirts, but the subcommittee spent \$5,000 on them. Komives, Lucas, and McMahon ask, "Which of the five principles would you use in working through this dilemma? Do any of the principles clash with one another, such as respecting the autonomy of the committee and doing no harm to those who might be hurt by the symbolism on the t-shirt?" (p. 269).

The 12 Questions

Nash (as cited in Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998) presents another model for addressing ethical dilem-

mas. He poses 12 questions to ask before making a decision or taking any action:

- Have you defined the problem accurately?
- How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?
- How did this situation occur in the first place?
- To whom and to what do you give your loyalty as a person and as a school leader?
- What do you intend in making this decision?
- How does this intention compare with the probable results?
- Whom could your decision or action injure?
- Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties before you make your decision?
- Are you confident that your position will be as valid over a long a period of time as it seems now?
- Could you disclose your decision or action to your boss, the school board, your family, and the community without a qualm?
- What is the symbolic potential of your action if understood? If misunderstood?
- Under what conditions would you allow exceptions to your decision?

The following scenario can illuminate how those 12 questions can clarify a course of action: It comes to your attention that a teacher shoved one of the class's most difficult students out of frustration. The student fell into the stairwell banister and now complains of shoulder pain. No other student or faculty member witnessed the incident. It's the student's word against the teacher's word. The teacher privately admits the indiscretion to you. He is one of your best teachers and is always willing to take the more difficult students in the school. The student's mother has scheduled a meeting with you about the incident. The teacher has asked you to back his version of the story.

A Revealing Survey

Klinker and Hackmann (2004) conducted a study of 104 secondary administrators who received state principal-of-the-year awards. The research questions were, Do principals make ethical decisions in accordance to an ethical standard? and, What justifications do the respondents use for making ethical decisions? The principals completed a questionnaire

that included scenarios that were likely to be encountered by principals, including student discipline and teacher evaluation issues. Respondents were asked to make choices and provide justifications for those choices. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were undertaken.

Four themes emerged from the study: courage, the common good, gut feelings, and difficulty in defining ethics. Principals reported that making tough ethical decisions took a lot of courage. Principals made decisions, they reported, on the basis of benefit for everyone or the common good. For example, one principal stated that although he felt bad about having to terminate a teacher who had only four years left to retirement, he made his decision on the basis of what he felt was best for the school.

Very significantly, principals explained that decision making involved investigating the case thoroughly, remaining aware and sensitive to others' needs, listening for different points of view, and examining all aspects of the problem. Yet when it came down to making a decision, those top principal leaders used their instincts. As one respondent said, "It's a gut feeling. An emotion, I can't explain it" (Klinker & Hackmann, 2004, p. 449). Finally, principals reported that although they made ethical choices, they had a hard time defining "ethics."

Results of the study indicated that although a majority of the principals were able to select the most appropriate action response to a case situation, at least one-third "selected inappropriate actions for two of the three narratives." "Moreover," they continue, "respondents had difficulty understanding the processes through which they made their decisions" (Klinker & Hackmann, 2004, p. 453).

The authors concluded that when confronted with ethical dilemmas, principals must fully examine their own beliefs and values and try to make their judgments in



rational ways. They conclude, "Ethical decisions are nested within social, emotional, and psychological contexts. Understanding this complexity of contexts can be helpful to beginning administrators and assist them in making appropriate ethical decisions" (Klinker & Hackmann, 2004, p. 453).

Conclusion

The ethical decision-making approaches presented here can help you reach a more informed and carefully analyzed decision before you take any action. Too often, we are tempted to quickly put out fires or react to pressing dilemmas without engaging in a process that would provide some assurance that the right decision was made. The models alone will not necessarily help you to resolve every dilemma you encounter, but they provide a framework to guide your decision making. They do not provide

the moral imagination and creative thinking that are needed to address complex situations. That is up to you. PL

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Author's note: The material in this article is drawn from the author's previously published work, What Every Principal Should Know About Ethical and Spiritual Leadership (2006, Corwin).

Jeffrey Glanz (glanz@yu.edu) is the Silverstein Chair of Professional Ethics and Values at Azrieli Graduate School at Yeshiva University in New York City.

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