

MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

JOSEPHSON INSTITUTE OF ETHICS
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INTRODUCTION

Say you are the widowed parent of three children. You have no immediate family or close friends. A severe recession has left you jobless for 18 months. Your skills are not in demand. Six months ago you started looking outside your field, increasingly willing to take anything. But even minimum wage positions were scarce and did not pay enough for one person to live on, much less four. You're deep in debt and have filed for bankruptcy. The stress has triggered your diabetes; you have no medical coverage. You are three months overdue on the rent and have been served with an eviction notice. You've been trying to keep a cheerful, hopeful attitude for your children, who so far don't know the extent of the family's woes.

Now a job you applied for 12 months ago has come up. The salary is higher than any you've ever received and the benefits package would cover your whole family. You are told the choice is between you and one other person, but you have to swear in writing that you have never taken illegal drugs. Trouble is, you have. You used to smoke marijuana, not a lot, but regularly. You have never taken any other illegal drug and you don't use marijuana anymore either — but that hasn't changed your opinion that it is absurd and hypocritical that marijuana is illegal while alcohol and nicotine — which every year kill millions and cost society billions — aren't.

So, do you lie on the application?

Few choices we face are so difficult, but you get the point: being ethical isn't always easy. Yet it is always important. For we live with a common truth: everything we say and do represents a choice, and how we decide determines the shape of our lives.

Making ethical decisions requires the ability to make distinctions between competing choices. It requires training, in the home and beyond. That's where this booklet comes in. Making Ethical Decisions is a blueprint to help the reader arrive at sound decisions. For more than a dozen years, various versions of this publication have served as the basic primer of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a nonprofit teaching, training and consulting organization based in Marina del Rey, California, and active nationwide. The Institute advocates principled decision-making based on six values that cut across time, culture, politics, religion, ethnicity and other human division. These values, called the "Six Pillars of Character," are *trustworthiness*, *respect*, *responsibility*, *fairness*, *caring* and *good citizenship (responsible participation in society)*. The Six Pillars are the basis of ethically defensible decisions and the foundation of well-lived lives.

This edition of Making Ethical Decisions represents a substantial re-working of earlier editions, offering new examples and intensifying the focus on discernment, discipline and effectiveness as vital elements of ethical decision making.

Yet however much the material is reworked, the real work remains with you. No one can simply read about ethics and become ethical. It's not that easy. People have to make many decisions under economic, professional and social pressure. Rationalization and laziness are constant temptations. But making ethical decisions is worth it, if you want a better life and a better world. Keep in mind that whether for good or ill, change is always just a decision away.

— Wes Hanson, editor

CHAPTER 1: MAKING SENSE OF ETHICS

Should I lie on a job application to spare my children from being thrown in the street? Should I ignore my boss's hypocrisies to keep my position? Making ethical decisions can be difficult. We make most of them in a world of economic, professional and social pressures, which can obscure moral issues. Often we don't know or understand crucial facts. We must rank competing moral claims and must be able to predict the likely consequences of choices.

Ethical decision making requires more than a belief in the importance of ethics. It also requires ethical sensitivity to implications of choices, the ability to evaluate complex, ambiguous and incomplete facts, and the skill to implement ethical decisions effectively.

Most of all, it requires a framework of principles that are reliable (such as the Six Pillars of Character) and a procedure for applying them to problems. This booklet provides both.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics refers to principles that define behavior as right, good and proper. Such principles do not always dictate a single "moral" course of action, but provide a means of evaluating and deciding among competing options.

The terms "ethics" and "values" are not interchangeable. Ethics is concerned with how a moral person should behave, whereas values are the inner judgments that determine how a person actually behaves. Values concern ethics when they pertain to beliefs about what is right and wrong. Most values, however, have nothing to do with ethics. For instance, the desire for health and wealth are values, but not ethical values.

The Importance of Universality

Most people have convictions about what is right and wrong based on religious beliefs, cultural roots, family background, personal experiences, laws, organizational values, professional norms and political habits. These are not the best values to make ethical decisions by — not because they are unimportant, but because they are not universal.

In contrast to consensus ethical values — such basics as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship — personal and professional beliefs vary over time, among cultures and among members of the same society. They are a source of continuous historical disagreement, even wars. There is nothing wrong with having strong personal and professional moral convictions about right and wrong, but unfortunately, some people are "moral imperialists" who seek to impose their personal moral judgments on others. The universal ethical value of respect for others dictates honoring the dignity and autonomy of each person and cautions against self-righteousness in areas of legitimate controversy.

When Values Collide

Our values are what we prize and our values system is the order in which we prize them. Because they rank our likes and dislikes, our values determine how we will behave in certain situations. Yet values often conflict. For example, the desire for personal independence may run counter to our desire for intimacy. Our desire to be honest may clash with the desire to be rich, prestigious or kind to others. In such cases, we resort to our values system. The values we consistently rank higher than others are our core values, which define character and personality.

From Values to Principles

We translate values into principles so they can guide and motivate ethical conduct. Ethical principles are the rules of conduct that derive from ethical values. For example, honesty is a value that governs behavior in the form of principles such as: tell the truth, don't deceive, be candid, don't cheat. In this way, values give rise to principles in the form of specific "dos" and "don'ts."

Ethics and Action

Ethics is about putting principles into action. Consistency between what we say we value and what our actions say we value is a matter of integrity.

It is also about self-restraint:

- * Not doing what you have the power to do. An act isn't proper simply because it is permissible or you can get away with it.
- * Not doing what you have the right to do. There is a big difference between what you have the right to do and what is right to do.
- * Not doing what you want to do. In the well-worn turn of phrase, an ethical person often chooses to do more than the law requires and less than the law allows.

Why Be Ethical?

People have lots of reasons for being ethical:

- * There is inner benefit. Virtue is its own reward.
- * There is personal advantage. It is prudent to be ethical. It's good business.
- * There is approval. Being ethical leads to self-esteem, the admiration of loved ones and the respect of peers.
- * There is religion. Good behavior can please or help serve a deity.
- * There is habit. Ethical actions can fit in with upbringing or training.

There are obstacles to being ethical, which include:

- * The ethics of self-interest. When the motivation for ethical behavior is self-interest, decision-making is reduced to risk-reward calculations. If the risks from ethical behavior are high — or the risks from unethical behavior are low and the reward is high — moral principles succumb to expediency. This is not a small problem: many people cheat on exams, lie on resumes, and distort or falsify facts at work. The real test of our ethics is whether we are willing to do the right thing even when it is not in our self-interest.
- * The pursuit of happiness. Enlightenment philosophers and the American Founding Fathers enshrined the pursuit of happiness as a basic right of free men. But is this pursuit a moral end in itself? It depends on how one defines happiness. Our values, what we prize and desire, determine what we think will make us happy. We are free to pursue material goals and physical sensations, but that alone rarely (if ever) leads to enduring happiness. It more often results in a lonely, disconnected, meaningless existence. The morally mature individual finds happiness in grander pursuits than money, status, sex and mood-altering substances. A deeper satisfaction lies in honoring universal ethical values, that is, values that people everywhere believe should inform behavior. That unity between principled belief and honorable behavior is the foundation for real happiness.

CHAPTER 2: THE SIX PILLARS OF CHARACTER

Trustworthiness. Respect. Responsibility. Fairness. Caring. Citizenship. The Six Pillars of Character are ethical values to guide our choices. The standards of conduct that arise out of those values constitute the ground rules of ethics, and therefore of ethical decision-making.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the number six. We might reasonably have eight or 10, or more. But most universal virtues fold easily into these six. The number is not unwieldy and the Six Pillars of Character can provide a common lexicon. Why is a common lexicon necessary? So that people can see what unites our diverse and fractured society. So we can communicate more easily about core values. So we can understand ethical decisions better, our own and those of others.

The Six Pillars act as a multi-level filter through which to process decisions. So, being trustworthy is not enough — we must also be caring. Adhering to the letter of the law is not enough — we must accept responsibility for our action or inaction.

The Pillars can help us detect situations where we focus so hard on upholding one moral principle that we sacrifice another — where, intent on holding others accountable, we ignore the duty to be compassionate; where, intent on getting a job done, we ignore how.

In short, the Six Pillars can dramatically improve the ethical quality of our decisions, and thus our character and lives.

1. TRUSTWORTHINESS

When others trust us, they give us greater leeway because they feel we don't need monitoring to assure that we'll meet our obligations. They believe in us and hold us in higher esteem. That's satisfying. At the same time, we must constantly live up to the expectations of others and refrain from even small lies or self-serving behavior that can quickly destroy our relationships.

Simply refraining from deception is not enough. Trustworthiness is the most complicated of the six core ethical values and concerns a variety of qualities like honesty, integrity, reliability and loyalty.

Honesty

There is no more fundamental ethical value than honesty. We associate honesty with people of honor, and we admire and rely on those who are honest. But honesty is a broader concept than many may realize. It involves both communications and conduct.

Honesty in communications is expressing the truth as best we know it and not conveying it in a way likely to mislead or deceive. There are three dimensions:

Truthfulness. Truthfulness is presenting the facts to the best of our knowledge. Intent is the crucial distinction between truthfulness and truth itself. Being wrong is not the same thing as lying, although honest mistakes can still damage trust insofar as they may show sloppy judgment.

Sincerity. Sincerity is genuineness, being without trickery or duplicity. It precludes all acts, including half-truths, out-of-context statements, and even silence, that are intended to create beliefs or leave impressions that are untrue or misleading.

Candor. In relationships involving legitimate expectations of trust, honesty may also require candor, forthrightness and frankness, imposing the obligation to volunteer information that another person needs to know.

Honesty in conduct is playing by the rules, without stealing, cheating, fraud, subterfuge and other trickery. Cheating is a particularly foul form of dishonesty because one not only seeks to deceive but to take advantage of those who are not cheating. It's a two-fer: a violation of both trust and fairness.

Not all lies are unethical, even though all lies are dishonest. Huh? That's right, honesty is not an inviolate principle. Occasionally, dishonesty is ethically justifiable, as when the police lie in undercover operations or

when one lies to criminals or terrorists to save lives. But don't kid yourself: occasions for ethically sanctioned lying are rare and require serving a very high purpose indeed, such as saving a life — not hitting a management-pleasing sales target or winning a game or avoiding a confrontation.

Integrity

The word integrity comes from the same Latin root as "integer," or whole number. Like a whole number, a person of integrity is undivided and complete. This means that the ethical person acts according to her beliefs, not according to expediency. She is also consistent. There is no difference in the way she makes decisions from situation to situation, her principles don't vary at work or at home, in public or alone.

Because she must know who she is and what she values, the person of integrity takes time for self-reflection, so that the events, crises and seeming necessities of the day do not determine the course of her moral life. She stays in control. She may be courteous, even charming, but she is never duplicitous. She never demeans herself with obsequious behavior toward those she thinks might do her some good. She is trusted because you know who she is: what you see is what you get.

People without integrity are called "hypocrites" or "two-faced."

Reliability (Promise-Keeping)

When we make promises or other commitments that create a legitimate basis for another person to rely upon us, we undertake special moral duties. We accept the responsibility of making all reasonable efforts to fulfill our commitments. Because promise-keeping is such an important aspect of trustworthiness, it is important to:

Avoid bad-faith excuses. Interpret your promises fairly and honestly. Don't try to rationalize noncompliance.

Avoid unwise commitments. Before making a promise consider carefully whether you are willing and likely to keep it. Think about unknown or future events that could make it difficult, undesirable or impossible. Sometimes, all we can promise is to do our best.

Avoid unclear commitments. Be sure that, when you make a promise, the other person understands what you are committing to do.

Loyalty

Some relationships — husband-wife, employer-employee, citizen-country — create an expectation of allegiance, fidelity and devotion. Loyalty is a responsibility to promote the interests of certain people, organizations or affiliations. This duty goes beyond the normal obligation we all share to care for others.

Limitations to loyalty. Loyalty is a tricky thing. Friends, employers, co-workers and others may demand that we rank their interests above ethical considerations. But no one has the right to ask another to sacrifice ethical principles in the name of a special relationship. Indeed, one forfeits a claim of loyalty when he or she asks so high a price for maintaining the relationship.

Prioritizing loyalties. So many individuals and groups make loyalty claims on us that we must rank our loyalty obligations in some rational fashion. For example, it's perfectly reasonable, and ethical, to look out for the interests of our children, parents and spouses even if we have to subordinate our obligations to other children, neighbors or co-workers in doing so.

Safeguarding confidential information. Loyalty requires us to keep some information confidential. When keeping a secret breaks the law or threatens others, however, we may have a responsibility to "blow the whistle."

Avoiding conflicting interests. Employees and public servants have a duty to make all professional decisions on merit, unimpeded by conflicting personal interests. They owe ultimate loyalty to the public.

2. RESPECT

People are not things, and everyone has a right to be treated with dignity. We certainly have no ethical duty to hold all people in high esteem, but we should treat everyone with respect, regardless of who they are and what they have done. We have a responsibility to be the best we can be in all situations, even when dealing with unpleasant people.

The Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you — nicely illustrates the Pillar of respect. Respect prohibits violence, humiliation, manipulation and exploitation. It reflects notions such as civility, courtesy, decency, dignity, autonomy, tolerance and acceptance.

Civility, Courtesy and Decency

A respectful person is an attentive listener, although his patience with the boorish need not be endless (respect works both ways). Nevertheless, the respectful person treats others with consideration, and doesn't resort to intimidation, coercion or violence except in extraordinary and limited situations to defend others, teach discipline, maintain order or achieve social justice. Punishment is used in moderation and only to advance important social goals and purposes.

Dignity and Autonomy

People need to make informed decisions about their own lives. Don't withhold the information they need to do so. Allow all individuals, including maturing children, to have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Tolerance and Acceptance

Accept individual differences and beliefs without prejudice. Judge others only on their character, abilities and conduct.

3. RESPONSIBILITY

Life is full of choices. Being responsible means being in charge of our choices and, thus, our lives. It means being accountable for what we do and who we are. It also means recognizing that our actions matter and we are morally on the hook for the consequences. Our capacity to reason and our freedom to choose make us morally autonomous and, therefore, answerable for whether we honor or degrade the ethical principles that give life meaning and purpose.

Ethical people show responsibility by being accountable, pursuing excellence and exercising self-restraint. They exhibit the ability to respond to expectations.

Accountability

An accountable person is not a victim and doesn't shift blame or claim credit for the work of others. He considers the likely consequences of his behavior and associations. He recognizes the common complicity in the triumph of evil when nothing is done to stop it. He leads by example.

Pursuit of Excellence

The pursuit of excellence has an ethical dimension when others rely upon our knowledge, ability or willingness to perform tasks safely and effectively.

Diligence. It is hardly unethical to make mistakes or to be less than "excellent," but there is a moral obligation to do one's best, to be diligent, reliable, careful, prepared and informed.

Perseverance. Responsible people finish what they start, overcoming rather than surrendering to obstacles. They avoid excuses such as, "That's just the way I am," or "It's not my job," or "It was legal."

Continuous Improvement. Responsible people always look for ways to do their work better.

Self-Restraint

Responsible people exercise self-control, restraining passions and appetites (such as lust, hatred, gluttony, greed and fear) for the sake of longer-term vision and better judgment. They delay gratification if necessary and never feel it's necessary to "win at any cost." They realize they are as they choose to be, every day.

4. FAIRNESS

What is fairness? Most would agree it involves issues of equality, impartiality, proportionality, openness and due process. Most would agree that it is unfair to handle similar matters inconsistently. Most would agree that it is unfair to impose punishment that is not commensurate with the offense. The basic concept seems simple, even intuitive, yet applying it in daily life can be surprisingly difficult. Fairness is another tricky concept, probably more subject to legitimate debate and interpretation than any other ethical value. Disagreeing parties tend to maintain that there is only one fair position (their own, naturally). But essentially fairness implies adherence to a balanced standard of justice without relevance to one's own feelings or inclinations.

Process

Process is crucial in settling disputes, both to reach the fairest results and to minimize complaints. A fair person scrupulously employs open and impartial processes for gathering and evaluating information necessary to make decisions. Fair people do not wait for the truth to come to them; they seek out relevant information and conflicting perspectives before making important judgments.

Impartiality

Decisions should be made without favoritism or prejudice.

Equity

An individual, company or society should correct mistakes, promptly and voluntarily. It is improper to take advantage of the weakness or ignorance of others.

5. CARING

If you existed alone in the universe, there would be no need for ethics and your heart could be a cold, hard stone. Caring is the heart of ethics, and ethical decision-making. It is scarcely possible to be truly ethical and yet unconcerned with the welfare of others. That is because ethics is ultimately about good relations with other people.

It is easier to love "humanity" than to love people. People who consider themselves ethical and yet lack a caring attitude toward individuals tend to treat others as instruments of their will. They rarely feel an obligation to be honest, loyal, fair or respectful except insofar as it is prudent for them to do so, a disposition which itself hints at duplicity and a lack of integrity. A person who really cares feels an emotional response to both the pain and pleasure of others.

Of course, sometimes we must hurt those we truly care for, and some decisions, while quite ethical, do cause pain. But one should consciously cause no more harm than is reasonably necessary to perform one's duties.

The highest form of caring is the honest expression of benevolence, or altruism. This is not to be confused with strategic charity. Gifts to charities to advance personal interests are a fraud. That is, they aren't gifts at all. They're investments or tax write-offs.

6. CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship includes civic virtues and duties that prescribe how we ought to behave as part of a community. The good citizen knows the laws and obeys them, yes, but that's not all. She volunteers and stays informed on the issues of the day, the better to execute her duties and privileges as a member of a self-governing democratic society. She does more than her "fair" share to make society work, now and for future generations. Such a commitment to the public sphere can have many expressions, such as conserving resources, recycling, using public transportation and cleaning up litter. The good citizen gives more than she takes.

CHAPTER 3: GROUNDWORK FOR MAKING AN EFFECTIVE DECISION

Whether or not we realize it at the time, all our words, actions and attitudes reflect choices. A foundation to good decision-making is acceptance of two core principles:

1. we all have the power to decide what we do and what we say, and
2. we are morally responsible for the consequences of our choices.

Sometimes the power to choose is not self-evident. Outside control and inner emotions can leave one feeling powerless. Especially when one is young or immature, feelings of joy and depression, anger, fear, frustration, grief, anxiety, resentment, jealousy, guilt, loneliness, love and lust seem to come and go on their own, creating moods that may seem beyond control. The intensity of our feelings can encourage us to act and react impulsively as if we had no choice. We may not have the power to do everything we want to do, but we still have the power to decide what to do with what we have. And that is power enough.

Often people think the responsibility is avoidable. Young or immature individuals are notorious for laying the blame for their actions on others: "You made me lie," "I had to take the car without your permission," "I had no choice," or "It just happened." We need to teach our children that even though they may not like their choices they still have choices — and the responsibility to make them wisely. What is more, the power and responsibility associated with choice exists even when it is extremely difficult to be reflective. Anger, frustration, fear and passion are not acceptable excuses for bad choices (including bad attitudes).

Let's look at the components of good choices more closely.

Taking Choices Seriously

We all make thousands of decisions daily. Most of them do not justify extended forethought. They are simple, repetitive or without significant consequence. In such cases, it may be safe to just go with our feelings. It's OK to decide spontaneously what to wear and eat and what to say in casual conversations. When the issues are not morally complex and the stakes are small, our normal instincts are sufficient.

The problem comes when we don't distinguish between minor and potentially major issues, when we "go with the flow" in situations that demand a much more careful approach.

Recognizing Important Decisions

Reflection does not come naturally to everyone. That is why it is so important for parents to sharpen their children's instincts about what matters and what doesn't. This will serve them all through their lives.

The simple formula is: the greater the potential consequences, the greater the need for careful decision-making. To help identify important decisions, ask yourself these four questions:

1. Could you or someone else suffer physical harm?
2. Could you or someone else suffer serious emotional pain?
3. Could the decision hurt your reputation, undermine your credibility, or damage important relationships?
4. Could the decision impede the achievement of any important goal?

Good Decisions Are Both Ethical and Effective

Ethical Decisions. A decision is ethical when it is consistent with the Six Pillars of Character – ethical decisions generate and sustain trust; demonstrate respect, responsibility, fairness and caring; and are consistent with good citizenship. If we lie to get something we want and we get it, the decision might well be called effective, but it is also unethical.

Effective Decisions. A decision is effective if it accomplishes something we want to happen, if it advances our purposes. A simple test is: are you satisfied with the results? A choice that produces unintended and undesirable results is ineffective.

For example, if we make a casual remark to make someone feel good but it makes him feel bad instead, we were ineffective. If we decide to do something we really don't want to do just to please a friend and the decision ends up getting us in serious trouble, it's ineffective.

The key to making effective decisions is to think about choices in terms of their ability to accomplish our most important goals. This means we have to understand the difference between immediate and short-term goals and longer-range goals.

Effectiveness Example: Suzy and Sue

Suzy is both worried and furious. Her friend Sue is more than two hours late. As the clock ticks away, Suzy is going over in her mind all the things she can say and do to make Sue understand that her behavior is unacceptable. She reviews in her mind a direct confrontation that may well involve raised voices and heated tempers. This type of setting is the breeding ground for bad decisions.

If Suzy wants to make an effective and ethical decision and avoid doing something foolish and impulsive, she must set aside emotions long enough to allow her to think clearly about her objectives, both short-term and long-term. Her most immediate desire may be to vent her anger and frustration in the belief that it will teach a lesson. Yet her longer-term goal is to help Sue become more responsible and respectful. And she would like to strengthen rather than weaken their relationship and the quality of their communications.

If Suzy thinks about these potentially conflicting goals she will realize how important it is to choose her words and tone carefully. Her decision on how to handle this situation is an important one that could significantly affect her relationship with Sue.

Among the questions that arise are: Is Suzy more concerned about being sure Sue knows how angry she is or is she more interested in trying to get Sue to think and act differently in the future? Does Suzy want a forced apology or real remorse? Does she want to make Sue feel bad or angry? How important is it that Suzy shows that she is in control as opposed to developing a more respectful, mature relationship with Sue? Obviously the answers to these questions greatly affect the way Suzy reacts.

Suzy is trying to make an effective decision. If we fail to adequately consider our choices in terms of longer-term consequences, we might accomplish short-term objectives (expressing anger), but at the cost of our long-term goals. Good decisions help us achieve our major goals, poor ones impede us from doing so.

And keep in mind that at this stage Suzy doesn't even know why Sue is late. Perhaps there are good and persuasive reasons (e.g., she had to take a friend to the hospital or her car broke down). In any event, to react without first asking for an explanation is unfair.

Discernment and Discipline

There are two critical aspects to ethically sound decisions: knowing what to do and doing it.

Discernment. The first requirement of good decisions is discernment. It is not obvious to everyone, for example, that it is just as dishonest to deliberately deceive someone by half-truths and omissions as to tell an outright lie. It's also not always clear how to respond most effectively. Discernment requires knowledge and judgment.

Discipline. Good decisions also require discipline, the strength of character to do what should be done even when it is costly or uncomfortable. It's not enough that we discern the ethical and effective course; we must follow it. This often takes will power or moral courage: the willingness to do the right thing even when it is inconvenient, scary, difficult or costly.

In the example above, discernment and discipline play crucial roles. Suzy may know she should control her temper and develop a thoughtful strategy. But knowing and doing are two different things. It will take a tremendous amount of discipline to overcome her anger. Yet isn't that precisely what we want others to do? If Suzy handles the situation effectively she will model good decision-making and increase the likelihood that Sue will learn to do likewise.

Stakeholders

Each person affected by a decision has a stake in the decision and a moral claim on the decision-maker. Good decisions take into account the possible consequences of words and actions on all those potentially affected by a decision ("stakeholders").

Being thoughtful or considerate about the way our choices affect others is one aspect of using the stakeholder concept. Another is to be systematic and disciplined in thinking about whom a decision could affect. The stakeholder concept reinforces our obligation to make all reasonable efforts to foresee possible consequences and take reasonable steps to avoid unjustified harm to others.

Stakeholders Example: Charlie and the "Harmless" Prank

Suppose Charlie, a high school senior and member of the football team, is being pressured by friends to take part in a major prank involving putting glue in the door locks of classrooms. Preventing entry to the school may seem funny at first, but he might be less likely to participate if he thinks about all the stakeholders and consequences. It is likely to cost a great deal of money to fix the problem and it will disrupt the lives and plans of hundreds of teachers and students. In addition, if Charlie is caught, it's likely that he will be disciplined in ways that involve lots of others. If he isn't allowed to play in the next football game his teammates and school supporters will be disappointed. If he is suspended he may not be able to attend the senior prom and his date will be upset. His parents could be greatly embarrassed and the school may receive negative publicity that affects the reputation of all students. Finally, it is hard to estimate all the personal costs – it may affect graduation, the ability to get into a college, the possibility of getting or keeping an athletic scholarship and the need to go to summer school. If Charlie thinks of all these things before he chooses, a good decision is more likely.

If we consider the likely impact of actions and words — including physical and emotional harm to others — we'll make better choices and have better relationships. But intelligent decision-making has more far-reaching effects than avoiding immediate harm. Bad choices lead to unhappy, unfulfilled lives; good choices lead to greater happiness and satisfaction in everything one does.

CHAPTER 4: THE SEVEN-STEP PATH TO BETTER DECISIONS

1. STOP AND THINK

One of the most important steps to better decisions is the oldest advice in the world: think ahead. To do so it's necessary to first stop the momentum of events long enough to permit calm analysis. This may require discipline, but it is a powerful tonic against poor choices.

The well-worn formula to count to 10 when angry and to a hundred when very angry is a simple technique designed to prevent foolish and impulsive behavior. But we are just as apt to make foolish decisions when we are under the strain of powerful desires or fatigue, when we are in a hurry or under pressure, and when we are ignorant of important facts.

Just as we teach our children to look both ways before they cross the street, we can and should instill the habit of looking ahead before they make any decision.

Stopping to think provides several benefits. It prevents rash decisions. It prepares us for more thoughtful discernment. And it can allow us to mobilize our discipline.

2. CLARIFY GOALS

Before you choose, clarify your short- and long-term aims. Determine which of your many wants and don't-wants affected by the decision are the most important. The big danger is that decisions that fulfill immediate wants and needs can prevent the achievement of our more important life goals.

3. DETERMINE FACTS

Be sure you have adequate information to support an intelligent choice. You can't make good decisions if you don't know the facts.

To determine the facts, first resolve what you know and, then, what you need to know. Be prepared to get additional information and to verify assumptions and other uncertain information.

Once we begin to be more careful about facts, we often find that there are different versions of them and disagreements about their meaning. In these situations part of making sound decisions involves making good judgments as to who and what to believe.

Here are some guidelines:

- * Consider the reliability and credibility of the people providing the facts.
- * Consider the basis of the supposed facts. If the person giving you the information says he or she personally heard or saw something, evaluate that person in terms of honesty, accuracy and memory.
- * Remember that assumptions, gossip and hearsay are not the same as facts.
- * Consider all perspectives, but be careful to consider whether the source of the information has values different than yours or has a personal interest that could affect perception of the facts.
- * Where possible seek out the opinions of people whose judgment and character you respect, but be careful to distinguish the well-grounded opinions of well-informed people from casual speculation, conjecture and guesswork.
- * Finally, evaluate the information you have in terms of completeness and reliability so you have a sense of the certainty and fallibility of your decisions.

4. DEVELOP OPTIONS

Now that you know what you want to achieve and have made your best judgment as to the relevant facts, make a list of options, a set of actions you can take to accomplish your goals. If it's an especially important decision, talk to someone you trust so you can broaden your perspective and think of new choices. If you can think of only one or two choices, you're probably not thinking hard enough.

5. CONSIDER CONSEQUENCES

Two techniques help reveal the potential consequences.

- * “Pillar-ize” your options. Filter your choices through each of the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Will the action violate any of the core ethical principles? For instance, does it involve lying or breaking a promise; is it disrespectful to anyone; is it irresponsible, unfair or uncaring; does it involve breaking laws or rules? Eliminate unethical options.
- * Identify the stakeholders and how the decision is likely to affect them. Consider your choices from the point of view of the major stakeholders. Identify whom the decision will help and hurt.

6. CHOOSE

It's time to make your decision. If the choice is not immediately clear, see if any of the following strategies help:

- * Talk to people whose judgment you respect. Seek out friends and mentors, but remember, once you've gathered opinions and advice, the ultimate responsibility is still yours.
- * What would the most ethical person you know do? Think of the person you know or know of (in real life or fiction) who has the strongest character and best ethical judgment. Then ask yourself: what would that person do in your situation? Think of that person as your decision-making role model and try to behave the way he or she would. Many Christians wear a small bracelet with the letters WWJD standing for the question "What would Jesus do?" Whether you are Christian or not, the idea of referencing a role model can be a useful one. You could translate the question into: "What would God want me to do?" "What would Buddha or Mother Teresa do?" "What would Gandhi do?" "What would the most virtuous person in the world do?"
- * What would you do if you were sure everyone would know? If everyone found out about your decision, would you be proud and comfortable? Choices that only look good if no one knows are always bad choices. Good choices make us worthy of admiration and build good reputations. It's been said that character is revealed by how we behave when we think no one is looking and strengthened when we act as if everyone is looking.
- * Golden Rule: do unto to others as you would have them do unto you. The Golden Rule is one of the oldest and best guides to ethical decision-making. If we treat people the way we want to be treated we are likely to live up to the Six Pillars of Character. We don't want to be lied to or have promises broken, so we should be honest and keep our promises to others. We want others to treat us with respect, so we should treat others respectfully.

7. MONITOR AND MODIFY

Since most hard decisions use imperfect information and "best effort" predictions, some of them will inevitably be wrong. Ethical decision-makers monitor the effects of their choices. If they are not producing the intended results or are causing additional unintended and undesirable results, they re-assess the situation and make new decisions.

CHAPTER 5: OBSTACLES TO ETHICAL DECISION MAKING: RATIONALIZATIONS

We judge ourselves by our best intentions, our noblest acts and our most virtuous habits. But others tend to judge us by our last worst act. So in making tough decisions, don't be distracted by rationalizations. Here are some of the most common ones:

If It's Necessary, It's Ethical

This rationalization rests on the false assumption that necessity breeds propriety. The approach often leads to ends-justify-the-means reasoning and treating non-ethical tasks or goals as moral imperatives.

The False Necessity Trap

As Nietzsche put it, "Necessity is an interpretation, not a fact." We tend to fall into the "false necessity trap" because we overestimate the cost of doing the right thing and underestimate the cost of failing to do so.

If It's Legal and Permissible, It's Proper

This substitutes legal requirements (which establish minimal standards of behavior) for personal moral judgment. This alternative does not embrace the full range of ethical obligations, especially for individuals involved in upholding the public trust. Ethical people often choose to do less than the maximally allowable, and more than the minimally acceptable.

It's Just Part of the Job

Conscientious people who want to do their jobs well often fail to adequately consider the morality of their professional behavior. They tend to compartmentalize ethics into two domains: private and occupational. Fundamentally decent people thereby feel justified doing things at work that they know to be wrong in other contexts. They forget that everyone's first job is to be a good person.

It's All for a Good Cause

People are especially vulnerable to rationalizations when they seek to advance a noble aim. "It's all for a good cause" is a seductive rationale that loosens interpretations of deception, concealment, conflicts of interest, favoritism and violations of established rules and procedures.

I Was Just Doing It for You

This is a primary justification for committing "little white lies" or withholding important information in personal or professional relationships, such as performance reviews. This rationalization pits the values of honesty and respect against the value of caring. An individual deserves the truth because he has a moral right to make decisions about his own life based on accurate information. This rationalization overestimates other people's desire to be "protected" from the truth, when in fact most people would rather know unpleasant information than believe soothing falsehoods. Consider the perspective of people lied to: If they discovered the lie, would they thank you for being thoughtful or would they feel betrayed, patronized or manipulated?

I'm Just Fighting Fire With Fire

This is the false assumption that promise-breaking, lying and other kinds of misconduct are justified if they are routinely engaged in by those with whom you are dealing. Remember: when you fight fire with fire, you end up with the ashes of your own integrity.

It Doesn't Hurt Anyone

Used to excuse misconduct, this rationalization falsely holds that one can violate ethical principles so long as there is no clear and immediate harm to others. It treats ethical obligations simply as factors to be considered in decision-making, rather than as ground rules. Problem areas: asking for or giving special favors to family, friends or public officials; disclosing nonpublic information to benefit others; using one's position for personal advantage.

Everyone's Doing It

This is a false, "safety in numbers" rationale fed by the tendency to uncritically treat cultural, organizational or occupational behaviors as if they were ethical norms, just because they are norms.

It's OK If I Don't Gain Personally

This justifies improper conduct done for others or for institutional purposes on the false assumption that personal gain is the only test of impropriety. A related but narrower view is that only behavior resulting in improper financial gain warrants ethical criticism.

I've Got It Coming

People who feel they are overworked or underpaid rationalize that minor "perks" — such as acceptance of favors, discounts or gratuities — are nothing more than fair compensation for services rendered. This is also used as an excuse to abuse sick time, insurance claims, overtime, personal phone calls and personal use of office supplies.

I Can Still Be Objective

By definition, if you've lost your objectivity, you can't see that you've lost your objectivity! It also underestimates the subtle ways in which gratitude, friendship and the anticipation of future favors affect judgment. Does the person providing you with the benefit believe that it will in no way affect your judgment? Would the person still provide the benefit if you were in no position to help?

CHAPTER 6: BEING THE PERSON YOU WANT TO BE

"Character is knowing the good,
loving the good and doing the good."

— Thomas Lickona

"Character is what you are in the
dark."

— Rev. Dwight Moody

Ethical decisions have consequences, and one long-term consequence is to make you into a person of character. But what is character? It is the sum of one's distinctive traits, qualities and predilections, and amounts to one's moral constitution. Everyone has a character of some sort, but not everyone "has character." Having character is shorthand for having good character, and that means being a person who is admirable because of his self-assured, ethical behavior. Character is ethics in action.

"One's character is one's habitual way of behaving," education scholars Thomas Lickona, Eric Schaps and Catherine Lewis have written. "We all have patterns of behavior or habits and often we are quite unaware of them. When Socrates urged us to 'Know thyself,' he clearly was directing us to come to know our habitual ways of responding to the world around us."

Character is not the same thing as reputation. Character is what you are. Reputation is what people say you are. Abraham Lincoln likened character to a tree and reputation to its shadow.

Conscience is the awareness of a moral or ethical aspect to one's conduct; it urges us to prefer right over wrong. Because not everyone has good character, not everyone has a reliable conscience. After all, a bad person with no conscience at all feels just as good as a person with a clear conscience. Having a bad conscience is not necessarily a bad thing — it's a sign that one at least knows right from wrong. As Elvis Presley said, "When your intelligence don't tell you something ain't right, your conscience gives you a tap on the shoulder and says, 'Hold on.' If you don't listen, you're a snake." More people would listen to their conscience if they liked what it had to say.

Where Does Character Come From?

No one is born with good character. It's not hereditary. Yet everyone, regardless of background, enters the world with the opportunity to become a person of exemplary character.

Character has to be developed. "We are born with a potential for good character — and for the dispositions and habits that make up bad or weak character," writes education scholar Edwin Delattre. "Because we are born in ignorance of moral ideals, we must be instructed or trained if we are to achieve a good second nature."

Whether we give in to or overcome the negative messages and influence we face often depends on whether our parents, teachers, mentors and friends have exposed us to their own good example and morally inspiring ideas.

"Building character" refers to the process of instilling within a person positive, ethical traits based on principles that can be expressed many ways. For reasons of convenience and ease of recognition, they are summarized as the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

On Happiness

Ask struggling adolescents why they get high on drugs or alcohol or seek sex without intimacy or commitment and they're likely to tell you they just want to be happy. Ask young professionals why they're so driven to make money and they'll talk about all the things they'd get if they were rich, things that will make them happy. Ask adults why they had affairs or left their families and you'll hear it again: "I just want to be happy." So, why aren't more people happy?

One problem is unrealistic expectations. Some people think of happiness as a continuous series of pleasurable emotions, as feeling good all the time. Others expect a much more intense or lasting feeling of joy when they

achieve a desired goal. As a result, when getting what they want doesn't produce the feelings they expected they fall into despondency.

There's great danger in confusing a sustainable state of happiness with fleeting sensations of pleasure and fun. Those who make pleasure-seeking the focus of their lives soon find themselves needing new and different sources of pleasure. It's like a drug addict who needs continually higher doses to get high.

Happiness is a kind of emotional resting place of quiet satisfaction with one's life. It has been said that the art of living a happy life is a balance between getting what you want and learning to want what you get.

Traditionally, there are four main sources of real happiness: loving relationships, enjoyable work, service to others and faith.

Let's start with relationships. Are you spending enough time and energy nurturing this dimension of life? It may be possible to love what you do so much that you don't need other people, but more often than not, those who fail to develop and sustain meaningful relationships — with friends, family, life partners — regret their priorities when they find themselves alone. And it's not just success-obsessed executives who lament the lost opportunities of loving and being loved. Ministers, teachers, police officers and politicians — people who devote their lives to serving others — may be especially apt to neglect the people they need (and who need them) the most.

Is your work likely to make you happy? Of course, not everyone has the luxury of having a job they love. Unfortunately, these kinds of jobs don't often pay well and, after all, a job is how one makes a living. Still, many people put up with boring or unpleasant work situations because they place too much weight on what they earn and where they work and too little on what they do. If work is not emotionally rewarding you may want to consider trade-offs as an investment in happiness.

Helen Keller said, "True happiness is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose." Albert Schweitzer said, "One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve." These observations should remind us of the potency of peace of mind and sense of value one can get from devoting oneself to a worthy cause.

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