

# Ethical Dilemmas in Leadership

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# Exercise:

## What Does Ethics Mean to You?

- In your table groups, discuss this question
- Note some answers on your flip chart
- Identify a person to report out

# What does ethics mean to you?

## *Some typical answers:*

- Ethics have to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong
- **Ethics have to do with my religious beliefs**
- Being ethical is doing what the law requires
- Ethics consist of the standards of behavior our society accepts
- I guess I don't really know what the word means

# What is Ethics?

Simply stated:

“Ethics refer to **standards of behavior** that tell us how **human beings ought to act** in the many situations in which they find themselves—as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, and so on.” (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics)

# What Ethics are Not

- Ethics are not the same as feelings
- **Ethics are not religion**
- Ethics are not simply following the law
- Ethics are not the same as following culturally accepted norms
- Ethics are not science

# Identifying Ethical Standards is Hard

- If our ethics are not based on feelings, religion, law, accepted social practice, or science, what are they based on?
- How do those standards get applied to specific situations we face?

# Can Philosophers Help?

- Thinkers have sought answers to the question “what should our ethical standards be?” for thousands of years
- Five approaches have stood the test of time and offer a foundation or criteria for making ethical decisions

# Sources of Ethical Standards

- The Utilitarian Approach
- The Rights Approach
- The Justice and Fairness Approach
- The Common Good Approach
- The Virtue Approach



# Still Not Easy!

- Each approach has something to offer, but...
- We may not agree on what is a good and what is a harm
- We may not be aligned on the same set of human and civil rights
- We may have different views of what is just
- We may have different ideas about what constitutes the good life for human beings
- We may debate which virtues are most important
- And it's possible these approaches yield different answers to a given dilemma

# What is an Ethical Dilemma?

- When different approaches yield different decisions but we still must choose
- When the alternatives all seem wrong in some way but we still must choose
- When the alternatives all seem right in some way but we still must choose
- Note: if what is right is clear to you, it is not a dilemma, though it may require courage to follow through!

# Exercise:

## Identify an Ethical Dilemma

- Think of an ethical dilemma you have faced in your life
- Identify why it was a dilemma for you
- How did you resolve it?
- Share with your table group
- Choose one from your group and prepare to report out

# Ethical Dilemmas and Leadership

- Leaders, by definition, seek to bring about change
- This means their decisions will affect people
- So most of their decisions have an ethical component, even if a small one
- Also, other people's ethical dilemmas are often kicked up to the leader to decide

# A Review of the Five Approaches

- Let's review the criteria for each of the five approaches
- As we go, note whether there is an approach you are attracted to and use most often
- Note whether there is one you use rarely or not at all
- Be prepared to discuss in your table group

# The Utilitarian Approach

- Utilitarianism holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected
- The focus is on the consequence of the action: the greatest good for the greatest number
- If the action produces the maximum benefits for everyone, it doesn't matter whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation or coercion
- Sometimes the end justifies the means

# Problems with Utilitarianism

- How do we determine benefits and harms? How do we assign value? e.g. the value of life, the value of money, the value of time, the value of human dignity?
- Can we ever calculate all the consequences of our actions?
- What of justice? What happens to minorities?

# The Rights Approach

- A long history: “all men...are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
- A right is a justified claim on others
- A right to freedom means I have a claim to be left alone by others or, conversely, that others have a duty or responsibility to leave me alone



# Where Do Rights Come From?

- Many believe they are given by God: “God-given right,” “endowed by their Creator”
- Immanuel Kant believed they could be derived by the exercise of Reason
- The justification of a claim on others, i.e. a right, depends on some standard acknowledged and accepted by society, not simply the claim of an individual
- These may be codified in law, but they may also be moral standards that most people acknowledge

# Kant's Categorical Imperative

- For an action to be a moral action
  1. It must be amenable to being made consistently universal
  2. It must respect rational beings as ends in themselves and not as means only
  3. It must stem from, and respect, the autonomy of rational beings
- These three formulations are all aspects of the Categorical Imperative

# Negative and Positive Rights

- Negative rights claim a zone of non-interference from others, e.g. right to freedom, right to privacy, right to bear arms
- Positive rights claim for each person the positive assistance of others in fulfilling basic elements of human well-being like health and education
- Clearly, rights can be in conflict, and often are

# The Justice and Fairness Approach

- Justice and Fairness means giving each person what he or she deserves
- Justice is more concerned with what is right generally, fairness is often about judgments specific to a particular case
- A long history: Plato's "Republic" to John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice"
- How do we determine what people deserve?

# Deciding What is Just and Fair

- Individuals should be treated the same, unless they differ in ways that are relevant to the situation in which they are involved
- Where might we see no relevant difference and thus treat people the same at work?
- Where might we see relevant difference and thus treat people differently at work?

# The Common Good

- An old notion: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero
- With a new twist from John Rawls:  
“certain general conditions that are...  
equally to everyone’s advantage.”
- Having the social systems, institutions,  
and environments on which we all  
depend work in a manner that benefits  
all people

# The Virtue Approach

- The previous approaches focus on what people should *do*; the virtue approach focuses on what people should *be*
- Fundamental question: what kind of person should I be?
- Virtues: attitudes, dispositions, character traits such as honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, self-control, prudence

# The Virtue Approach cont'

- Virtues are developed through learning and practice
- Character can be improved
- A virtuous person will be naturally disposed to act consistent with moral principles
- Virtues are developed within communities



# Exercise:

## Which Approach Do You Use?

- In your table groups share which approach you are most attracted to and tend to use the most
- And the one you use the least
- Identify a person to report out

# Using the Four Approaches

- Each has a unique perspective to offer
- Each can help us evaluate potential actions in response to an ethical dilemma

# A Framework for Ethical Decision Making

- Recognize an ethical issue
- Get the facts
- Evaluate alternative actions using the five approaches
- Make a decision and test it
- Implement with “skillful means”
- Act and reflect on the outcome

# Evaluating Alternatives with the Five Approaches

- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm? (The Utilitarian Approach)
- Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Approach)
- Which option treats people equally or proportionately? (The Justice Approach)
- Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Approach)
- Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (The Virtue Approach)

# Ethical Decisions Are Not Enough

- Implement decisions with “skillful means”
- How can my decision be implemented with care and attention to everyone’s concerns?
- How should I communicate the decision and with what support?

# Some “Real Life” Case Studies

- Pam’s story
  - Pam describes the dilemma
  - Q&A from participants
  - Participants’ solution
  - What Pam did
- Nina’s story
  - Nina describes the dilemma
  - Q&A from participants
  - Participants’ solution
  - What Nina did

# Sources

- Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University
- Richard T. DeGeorge, *Business Ethics*, third edition, Macmillan, 1990



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