Ethical Dilemmas in Leadership

Excellence in Leadership Program
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Exercise:
What Do Ethics Mean to You?

• In your table groups, introduce yourselves and discuss this question

• Note some answers

• Identify a person to report out
What do 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 are 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
Applying the Five Approaches

• Does this action produce the most good and do the least harm? (The Utilitarian Approach)
• Does this action respect the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Approach)
• Does this action treat people equally or proportionately? (The Justice Approach)
• Does this action best serve the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Approach)
• Does this action lead me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (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
• 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 work 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
Exercise:
Which Approach Do You Use?

- Review slide on the Five Approaches
- 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
Applying the Five Approaches

• Does this action produce the most good and do the least harm? (The Utilitarian Approach)
• Does this action respect the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Approach)
• Does this action treat people equally or proportionately? (The Justice Approach)
• Does this action best serve the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Approach)
• Does this action lead me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (The Virtue Approach)
Using the Five 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?
How We Go Astray

• No clarity about our own values – what do we care about
• No recognition of the role of our emotions in our decision making
• Not being aware of our own blind spots
• Wanting to justify our decisions so we look good, e.g. not acknowledging mistakes
Insights

• What had you not considered before?
• What were you reminded of?
• How can you make this useful?