

Successful Supervisor Part 38

Maintaining the Ethical Edge

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I spend a great deal of my time working to help organizations understand the benefits of running an ethical culture. Believe it or not, there are many highly placed leaders who believe that making ethical decisions means lowering the organization's performance numbers.

The truth has been revealed in numerous books and articles that organizations that make the ethical choices, even though they may be difficult or costly in the short term, outperform unethical organizations by a factor of at least 1.5, often 2, or even more. Producing an annotated bibliography is not the purpose of this article; if you want to read up on the topic, look up "Business Ethics" on Wikipedia. There are over 200 references listed. As a "CliffsNotes" approach for this blog, I will refer you to the work of Raj Sisodia from his book "Firms of Endearment," which is one data point among dozens that all point to the same conclusion: organizations that do the right thing, even though it is difficult at times, end up thriving.

I serve on the Board of Directors of the Rochester Business Ethics Foundation (RABEF), where we seek to celebrate local organizations that are running their businesses with high ethics and are benefitting from that practice. Rather than gripe about corner-cutting operations that sacrifice the long term health for short term gains, RABEF seeks to champion those organizations that are doing business the right way and gaining huge sustainable benefits, including higher trust for all stakeholders.

You may ask what has this to do with being a supervisor? Well, it has a lot to do with it. I will grant that the ethical tone of an organization starts at levels far above the supervisor, but dealing with ethical dilemmas occurs at all levels, and supervisors are not exempt from the pressures that sometimes lead to ill-advised decisions.

If you are a supervisor, I guarantee that you have to make many ethical decisions every day. You may not recognize them as such, but you are routinely confronted with the opportunity to make choices that support or undermine the ethical standards that are espoused by your organization.

The first, and most important, consideration is how you can tell if you are facing an ethical dilemma. Nobody is going to sneak up behind you, tap you on the shoulder, and

whisper into your ear, “Pay attention Bub, this is an ethical choice you are making here.” The answer is disarmingly simple: you are facing an ethical dilemma if it is unclear to you what the “right” decision is. There are positive and negative consequences for every course of action you might take. Think of it this way: if the “right” thing to do is evident, then you have no problem making an ethical decision.

Once you are aware that you have an ethical decision on your hands, you have arrived at the moment of truth. You can rationalize the situation and make the “easy” or “most popular” decision regardless of the ethical considerations and be done with it. That action leads to a kind of dry rot within the group where you may actually be putting the larger organization on a slippery slope in terms of lost trust. Small unethical decisions often lead to larger ones and at different levels, so the reasons why get obscured in the thinking process, and standards get lowered across the board.

Here are some suggested approaches that can protect you from making unethical decisions.

1. Clarify your values and make sure people know what they are

Values written on a chart on the wall are useless unless you follow them, even when it is difficult to do. By compromising on a core value when it makes you swallow hard to follow it, you show that the entire list is a sham, so not only do the values lack power, they actually reveal an hypocrisy that tells people we follow our values only when it is convenient to do so.

2. Consider the context and all stakeholders

Before wrestling with what the “right” approach is, you need to get the facts. Difficult ethical choices are contextual. For example, we would all agree that taking someone else’s property is an ethical violation, but if you find an interesting book someone left in a recycle bin, it would not be a violation to take it. Consider all of the stakeholders when gathering the facts around an issue.

3. Don’t deal with the decision in a vacuum.

If you go through the logical calculation alone, you can often talk yourself into the expedient or less than ethical way out. That process ultimately leads to the need to explain your actions to others who can take pot shots at your judgment.

Once you recognize the “right” thing to do is hard to identify, get some help from others who might be able to add different perspectives to the discussion. This approach also has the advantage of gaining buy-in of the decisions from others.

4. Look at the issue through different lenses

In ethics classes, we teach a whole array of methods to analyze ethical dilemmas. I will briefly outline just four of the more popular methods here, and you can look up about a dozen other ways in any ethics text.

- **Utilitarian** – Do the greatest good for the greatest number – Consider the whole population and do that which provides the highest value for most of the people.
- **Limited Egoism** – Attempt to help others and do not violate their rights – This method comes from your attitude in making a decision. You attempt to assist other people and do so with a sense of fairness.
- **Kantian** – All correct behavior must be reversible or reciprocal, i.e. follow the Golden Rule. If I take an action that impacts another person, would I be willing to have that action taken on me if the roles were reversed?
- **Consistency** – is a form of moral reasoning that employs counter examples. Explore some analysis of what would happen if conditions were different. For example, you might ask “would I make this decision if I was starving”?

Your decision could go one way when looking at the problem from a Kantian perspective but a different way if you focus on Utilitarianism. Having more than one perspective adds work and potentially confusion, but it does help with the depth of your analysis.

5. Make a concrete decision based on the logic you are using

Often supervisors will equivocate and postpone making a decision because of the difficulty. This is a trap. Kicking the can down the road to next month or delegating the decision upward because you cannot make a call are ways of procrastinating, but they lack commitment. Make your decision once you have thought the problem through and consulted with others who might have alternate views.

6. Communicate your decision widely

Don't just tell people what your decision was, but lead them through the logic you went through to make the call. It is usually good to go all the way back to one of your values, and then describe how your decision was based on adherence to that value. You can share that other decisions were possible, but you feel, based on your analysis, that the one you made is the best long term course of action.

Leaders are faced with ethical dilemmas on a routine basis. It is how you react and deal with these decisions that will govern how well you do personally and how much trust your organization generates with all stakeholders. That increased trust is the basis for the productivity and profitability advantage of running an ethical organization.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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