

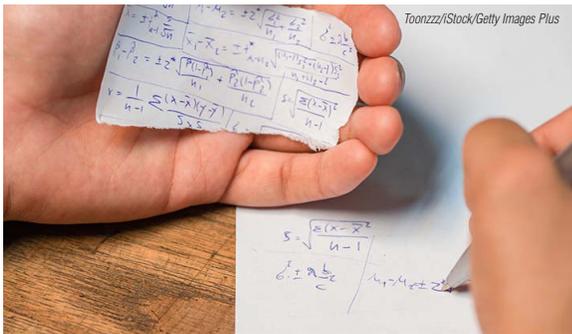
Make the Right Choice

Recognizing and Responding to Ethical Dilemmas



You have to make lots of decisions every day. What should I eat for breakfast? What should I do this weekend? Should I do my extra-credit homework tonight or watch TV instead?

You can probably respond to these situations without stressing out too much about them. But what about when you run into a more serious problem? What if your boss encourages you to lie to customers, or you consider cheating on a test? These aren't quite the same as your everyday decisions. These are ethical dilemmas.



So how do you know when you're facing an ethical dilemma? And, just as importantly, how do you respond to one? Keep reading to learn more about the characteristics of ethical dilemmas, how to spot them, and the steps you can take to successfully respond to them.

Objectives

- A** Explain characteristics of ethical dilemmas.
- B** Demonstrate techniques for recognizing and responding to ethical dilemmas.

What Is an Ethical Dilemma?

When you're unfamiliar with ethical dilemmas, it can be difficult to tell them apart from regular dilemmas and simple problems. Before you can attempt to recognize ethical dilemmas or respond to them, you need to know what sets ethical dilemmas apart. Although each ethical dilemma looks different, there are a few characteristics that they all share.

Characteristics of Ethical Dilemmas

- **There is a right and wrong choice.** In an ethical dilemma, you must decide between doing the right thing and the wrong thing. This is true even if you aren't sure yet what the right thing is! Sometimes the right choice is very clear, but sometimes it requires more work to figure it out. If you're dealing with a regular dilemma or an everyday problem, there may not necessarily be a choice that is wrong or right.



- ▲ Ethical dilemmas have right and wrong choices—but determining which choice is right and which choice is wrong can be challenging!

It's also important to remember that simply avoiding ethical dilemmas rarely leads to a good outcome. As you've probably noticed in your own life, problems tend to get worse when you avoid them. Think about what might happen if, when your friend's parent picks him up from school, you notice that the parent is visibly drunk. It's easier, and certainly less awkward, to avoid the situation entirely. But what could happen if you do? Your friend's parent could cause an accident, which could have a disastrous outcome.

Making a decision when facing an ethical dilemma—even if it's tough—will make you happier, more satisfied, and less conflicted. Even if your ultimate decision when facing an ethical dilemma is to do nothing, it's still important to make the decision instead of allowing the ethical dilemma to control your life.

Ethical Principles in Action

You don't have to face ethical dilemmas alone! Here's how each important ethical principle can help you recognize and respond to ethical dilemmas.



- **Integrity.** Integrity is acting with honesty in all situations. If you aren't acting honestly (or if a boss or friend isn't acting honestly), you might be facing an ethical dilemma.



- **Trust.** Being trustworthy means doing what you say you will do and telling the truth. If you're considering backing out of a commitment or avoiding a duty, you could be dealing with an ethical dilemma.



- **Accountability.** People who are accountable for their actions accept responsibility for all their decisions. You're facing an ethical dilemma if you make a mistake and consider putting the blame on your coworker.



- **Transparency.** Transparency means being truthful when you communicate. If you take all the credit for a group project without acknowledging the other group members' contributions, you're not behaving ethically.



- **Fairness.** Fairness means treating others the way you'd like to be treated. If some of your classmates are making fun of other classmates, you might wonder if you should speak up or ignore the situation.



- **Respect.** Ethical people always honor the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others. You may *want* to take something that doesn't belong to you, but that isn't ethical behavior.



- **Rule of law.** A big part of being ethical is respecting the rules and laws of your city and country. You may find yourself facing an ethical dilemma if you consider breaking the rules at work when your boss isn't around to find out.



- **Viability.** Viability means ensuring that your actions are helpful in the long term, not just the short term. You might think that one unethical decision won't make that big of a difference, but it's important to think about how that action will affect others in the coming weeks, months, and years.



Want more examples of ethical dilemmas? Check out this article by Don Rafner, "Common Ethical Workplace Dilemmas," at <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/common-ethical-workplace-dilemmas-748.html>. Remember, ethical dilemmas don't just happen in the workplace—they can happen anywhere!

Summary

Ethical dilemmas share several characteristics. In an ethical dilemma, there is a right and wrong choice and someone could be hurt. Ethical dilemmas often deal with what's legal. Ethical dilemmas, which are different than regular dilemmas, involve deciding whether something is right or wrong. It is important to respond to ethical dilemmas with your ethical principles in mind so that you will be a better employee, friend, student, and family member. Ethical principles can help you recognize and respond to ethical dilemmas.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What are three characteristics of ethical dilemmas?
2. How are ethical dilemmas different from regular dilemmas?
3. Why is it important to respond to ethical dilemmas?

THE GRAY ZONE

While Dana is in her company break room one day, she overhears two office higher-ups having a conversation about potential layoffs. They mention the names of several employees who will probably have to be let go so that the company can save money. Dana knows these employees very well—in fact, she knows that one of them just bought a house and another recently had a child. These people will definitely be put in a bind if they lose their jobs. Dana wants to warn her coworkers so that they have time to prepare or look for new jobs. But she also knows that she shouldn't have been eavesdropping, and the information she overheard was confidential. What should Dana do in this ethical dilemma?

Recognizing and Responding

Now that you understand the characteristics of ethical dilemmas, how can you tell when you're facing one? Although ethical dilemmas can come in many different shapes and sizes, there are a few questions you can ask yourself to figure out whether what you're facing is simply a problem or a true ethical dilemma.

- Could someone be hurt? As we mentioned earlier, in an ethical dilemma, someone or something could be hurt. If no one could possibly be harmed, you're probably facing a regular problem. If a friend, coworker, or company could be harmed, you're dealing with an ethical dilemma.
- Is there a right and wrong choice? Is one choice clearly on the right side of the law? Does one choice seem more fair or honest? Then you're probably facing an ethical dilemma.
- Are ethical principles being violated? Is your integrity at stake if you make the wrong decision? Will you be disrespecting a coworker or a friend's personal property? If any of your ethical principles are in danger of being violated, then you're likely facing an ethical dilemma.



- ▲ Asking yourself a series of questions is a helpful way to determine whether the issue you are facing is an ethical dilemma or just an everyday problem.

But recognizing ethical dilemmas isn't enough! If you want to be successful at work, with peers, and in your personal life, you also have to *respond* to ethical dilemmas. Sometimes, you will know immediately which decision is the right one. But not all ethical dilemmas are so simple. Sometimes, you won't be sure what you should do—there may be many solutions. Which one is the right decision? These steps can help you figure out the best way to respond to the ethical dilemmas you face.

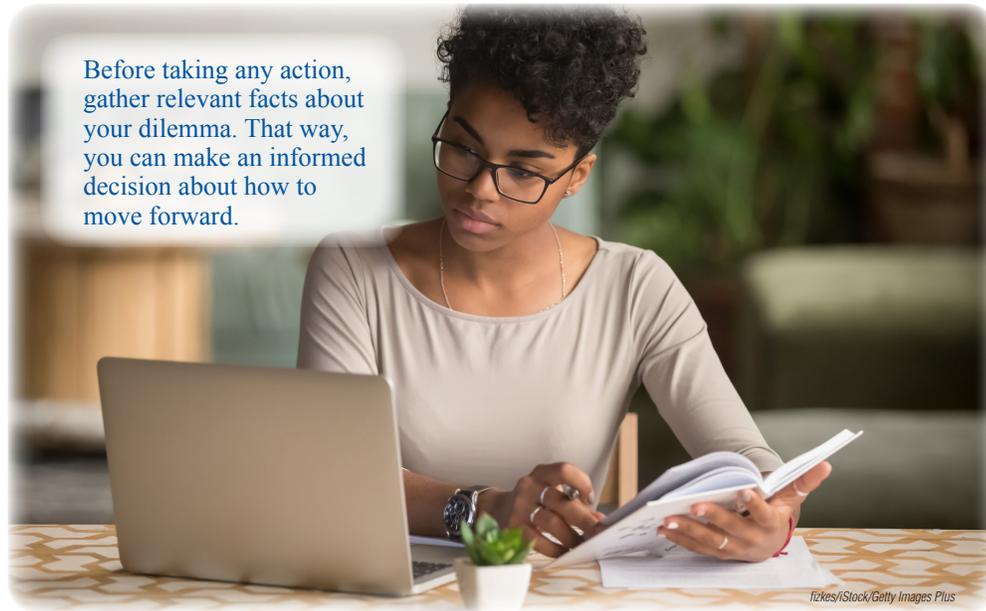
1 Identify the dilemma.

You can't resolve the dilemma if you don't know what it is. Take a careful look at what you're facing and be sure you're truly facing an ethical dilemma instead of just a problem. What might happen if a classmate tells you that she has drugs in her locker? You don't want her to get in trouble, but you know that your school is a drug-free zone and that having illegal drugs in the school isn't safe for anyone. Are ethical principles being violated? Is there a right and wrong choice? Could someone or something be hurt? In this case, your classmate isn't behaving ethically because she's breaking the law and your school's rules. You want to behave ethically by acting with integrity. And of course, someone could be hurt—your classmate.

It's also important to remember that ethical dilemmas aren't always obvious—sometimes you may find yourself in one accidentally, or the stakes may be relatively small. For example, imagine that you're attending a high school football game. You're standing with a group of people who've already purchased tickets, and since the ticket-taker assumes you've already purchased your ticket as well, he waves you through. Is it unethical for you not to pay, even though getting in for free was just an accident? Part of identifying ethical dilemmas is being aware of them, even when they might not be huge or immediately noticeable.

2 Get the facts.

It's important to know all the details about your ethical dilemma. Depending on how you resolve it, you might need to talk about your ethical dilemma with someone else, so you want to be sure you have all the facts straight. Who's involved? What is the dilemma? When/Where did it happen? Which ethical principles are being violated? Let's go back to the ethical dilemma of your classmate with drugs in her locker. You know that she is involved, but are there other students involved, too? Could you talk to some of her friends to find out more about the situation? What does your student handbook say about keeping drugs on school property?



3 Figure out who's affected.

Who is going to be hurt if the wrong action is taken? In our example, it could be your classmate, since having drugs is both dangerous and illegal. You may be hurt if school administrators find out that you knew about your classmate's situation but didn't report it. And, your school may be hurt in the long run if no one follows the rules that are meant to keep students safe.

Part of figuring out who's affected means deciding who should take action. If you're facing a situation that's dangerous or tricky, it may be best to involve someone else. For example, since you're dealing with something that is not just against the rules but also illegal, you likely won't be able to resolve it all by yourself. It's a good idea to involve a teacher or another trusted role model.

4 Consider all your potential actions.

In an ethical dilemma, there's definitely a right and wrong thing to do. But that doesn't mean you only have two options every time. In this example, you could choose to do nothing and pretend that you don't know your classmate has drugs. Or you could tell a teacher what's happening. But there are other options as well! You could confront your classmate in person and tell her that her behavior is wrong, or you could directly contact the police instead of a teacher. Brainstorming, a creative-thinking technique, can help you identify many possible solutions. Even if some of the solutions you've brainstormed don't seem viable, write them down anyway! You can always rule them out later.

Part of considering your potential actions is thinking about the consequences. What are the positives and negatives of each solution? What could go wrong? You might decide not to confront your classmate because you've already spoken with her and she didn't take your concerns seriously. You might also decide not to go straight to the police because you think it will be better for everyone if the school administration handles the problem. So now you have two solutions left: do nothing or tell a teacher about the situation. Doing nothing will mean that your classmate may not be caught, but if someone finds out that you knew there were drugs in school, you could get in trouble. Telling a teacher about the situation may mean that your classmate gets suspended, or worse. In your opinion, which of these solutions has the most positives and/or the fewest negatives?

5 Check your gut feeling.

Using a logical, step-by-step process is a great way to be sure you're responding correctly to an ethical dilemma. However, it's still important to check in with your gut feeling. What does your intuition tell you? Which solution feels right? You might have a strong feeling about what you should or shouldn't do. Perhaps you know in your gut that it's not right to pretend you don't know your classmate is keeping drugs in her locker. You feel that telling a teacher is the right thing to do.

For more information about gut feelings and intuition, check out this article "Should We Trust Our Gut Feeling When Making Decisions?" by Denise Hill:

<https://www.lifehack.org/591442/should-we-trust-our-gut-feeling-when-making-decisions>.

Going with your gut feeling can be tough at first, but it gets easier as you face and resolve more ethical dilemmas. If you're having a hard time deciding what's right, try asking yourself a few questions:

- What would my role models do in this situation?
- Will I sleep soundly knowing I made this decision?
- Am I violating any ethical principles?
- How will my decision affect other people?
- How would I feel if my decision was reported on the news? Would I make the same decision if I knew everyone would find out?



Read the article "Making Ethical Decisions: Things To Ask Yourself" from UC San Diego to learn more questions you might want to think about as you face ethical dilemmas:

<http://blink.ucsd.edu/finance/accountability/ethics/ask.html>.

6 Make and implement your decision.

Now it's time to make your final decision and put it into action. You decide that the right thing to do is to tell a teacher about the situation. You feel that your decision is the right one, but now you have to take the steps to actually resolve the dilemma. This could involve setting up a time before or after school to talk to a teacher in private.



- ▲ Telling a teacher about a difficult situation isn't always easy, but it might be the right choice in an ethical dilemma to keep everyone safe.

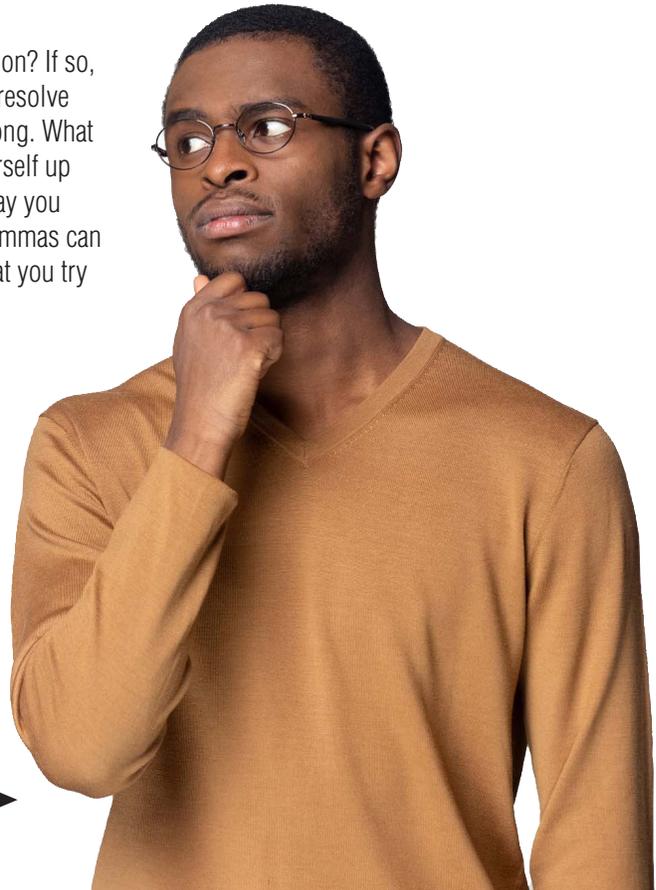
Just as you asked yourself earlier how other people will be affected by your decision, it's important to consider how those people will react. What action might your teacher take? How do you think your classmate will react? You can't control other people's reactions, but it's still good to prepare yourself. Remember that everyone won't always appreciate your decision—your classmate, for example, would probably be much happier if you kept her actions to yourself! But it's important to you and everyone else involved that you make the *right* decision, not just the easy or popular one.

7 Reflect on the outcome.

So, how did it go? Did you make the right decision? If so, congratulate yourself! If you didn't successfully resolve your ethical dilemma, think about what went wrong. What can you do differently next time? Don't beat yourself up if you made a decision that didn't turn out the way you thought it would. Learning to handle ethical dilemmas can take time, and in the meantime, it's important that you try your best to do what's right.

This article by Tom Marshall, "Do the Right Thing: Making Ethical Decisions in Everyday Life," describes several different ethical dilemmas: http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/01/do-the-right-thing-making-ethical-decisions-in-everyday-life/?_r=0. To read these dilemmas, scroll down through the article until you find the numbered items, starting with "1: In Your Neighborhood" and continuing through "9: In the Laboratory." Using the steps you've just learned, how would you solve these dilemmas?

As you learn to handle ethical dilemmas, reflect on each outcome. Did you make the right decision? How can you learn from this experience and make the right choice next time?



nikess/Stock/Getty Images Plus

Summary

To recognize ethical dilemmas, ask yourself three questions: Could someone be hurt? Is there a right and wrong choice? Are ethical principles being violated? The process of responding to ethical dilemmas includes identifying the dilemma, getting the facts, figuring out who's affected, considering all your potential actions, checking your gut feeling, making and implementing your decision, and reflecting on the outcome.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What can you do to find out whether you're facing an ethical dilemma?
2. Name the steps you can take to respond to ethical dilemmas.