

# What's the Situation?

## Reasons for Ethical Dilemmas



Open up any newspaper, turn on CNN, or check out a news website and you'll be bombarded with stories of people behaving badly. Whether it's fraud, theft, or lying, many people in the world try to get ahead with unethical behavior. But why? What's behind this unethical behavior and the decisions these people make?

There are many causes of ethical dilemmas. You'll face ethical dilemmas whether you're at work, home, or school! By learning about the most common reasons for ethical dilemmas, you can make sure you make the right decisions. Keep reading to learn more about the reasons for ethical dilemmas!

### Objectives

- A Discuss the nature of ethical dilemmas.
- B Describe causes of ethical dilemmas.

## What Are Ethical Dilemmas?

### Dilemmas and Principles

Have you ever had to make a decision about whether or not to cheat on a school project? Or whether you should take something that isn't yours, tell a lie, or accept credit for work you didn't do?



- ▲ Deciding whether or not to cheat off a classmate on a test is an ethical dilemma. Think about it: who could be hurt by your decision?

If so, then you've faced ethical dilemmas. Most of us come up against ethical dilemmas at one point or another in our personal and professional lives. But what makes an ethical dilemma different from a regular decision, such as whether or not to do extra credit for your Calculus class or what kind of new shoes you should buy?

First, let's explain what dilemmas are. A **dilemma** is a difficult situation in which you are required to make a decision. You face dilemmas all the time! Can you think of any decisions you've had to make or problems you've found solutions for recently? Maybe you had to decide which of two colleges you should attend. You would be happy at both, and both have their pros and cons, but you can only be a student at one. You're facing a dilemma.

**Ethical dilemmas** (also sometimes referred to as ethical situations) involve deciding whether something is right or wrong. In an ethical dilemma, if you pick the wrong choice, someone (or something) could be harmed. If you don't do extra credit for your Calculus class, you won't harm your teacher or the other students. In fact, no one will be hurt (except possibly your grade!). But if you cheat on a Calculus test, you can hurt your classmates and your teacher by disrespecting them and passing someone else's work off as your own. Similarly, no one will be harmed if you decide to buy one pair of shoes instead of another. But if you steal a pair of shoes, the store will lose money and employees may be punished.

As we mentioned, ethical dilemmas involve a right choice and a wrong choice. But what makes a choice wrong or right? The right choice involves following certain ethical principles at all times. Always following these **ethical principles** means your ethical beliefs don't change when you're in a new situation. You follow the same ethical principles at school, home, and work.

Take a look at these examples of ethical dilemmas and think about whether you've ever been in similar situations.

- A friend asks you to give him your homework so he can copy the answers. You know cheating isn't right, but you don't want your friend to fail.
- You promise your teacher you'll volunteer for a big school event, but when the day of the event finally comes, you would much rather hang out with your friends. You consider telling your teacher you're sick.
- When the woman in front of you in line at the grocery store is paying for her purchase, a \$20 bill falls out of her purse. You know you should give it back, but you could use the \$20.

These are situations in which there is a right choice and a wrong choice. They're ethical dilemmas because they cause you to think about your ethical principles and decide what the right action is. If you let your friend cheat, you're not helping create a **fair** classroom. If you break your promise to your teacher, you're not being **accountable**. And if you take someone else's money, you're not showing **respect** for other people's belongings. In other words, you're hurting people.



Thinking about all the ethical dilemmas you face on a regular basis may seem overwhelming. How can you make the right decisions all the time? It's important to remember that each ethical dilemma you encounter is an opportunity to make the right decision and show that you can follow ethical principles. So, next time you find yourself facing an ethical dilemma, remember: it's not a *challenge*, it's an *opportunity*!

## Summary

Ethical dilemmas are everywhere, and they involve deciding whether something is right or wrong. In an ethical dilemma, if you pick the wrong choice, someone (or something) could be harmed. Following ethical principles means your ethical beliefs don't change when you're in a new situation. Ethical dilemmas exist everywhere, even in your day-to-day life.



- ▲ Determining the right choice in an ethical dilemma isn't always easy—after all, there aren't signposts to help guide you in making the right decision!

## TOTAL RECALL

1. What is an ethical dilemma?
2. What does it mean to follow ethical principles?

# THE GRAY ZONE

You just started a new job as a salesperson for a large company. You like your job and your boss, but you aren't sure about the company's policies. Your boss encourages you to be very aggressive with potential clients. He wants you to exaggerate the benefits of the product and push the clients to make a purchase, no matter what. You don't think this is an ethical way to treat your clients, but all of the other salespeople seem to behave this way. You want to keep your job, impress your boss, and make your company successful, but you aren't sure about these selling practices. What should you do?

## Reasons and Causes



### What Makes a Dilemma?

Now that you have a better understanding of what ethical dilemmas are, let's take a look at a few common causes of ethical dilemmas. We'll primarily use examples from the business world, but remember, ethical dilemmas can happen in all areas of your life! You may think that you would never behave unethically, but you likely face ethical dilemmas every single day. By looking at the reasons behind ethical dilemmas, we can try to understand why so many people behave unethically—and make sure that we avoid common pitfalls like pressure from others, the desire to prove ourselves, conflicting values, greed, bad role models, and a lack of consequences.

- **Pressure from others.** Think about it: if you're surrounded by people who behave unethically, you might start to think you should behave unethically, too. In some industries and companies, unethical behavior isn't just accepted...it's encouraged by leaders! Let's say you work for a company that has branches all over the country. Your boss wants your branch to have the best sales in the region, so he encourages you to falsify your sales records. You know that lying about your sales isn't ethical, but you feel uncomfortable defying your boss's orders. You're facing an ethical dilemma because your ethical principles contradict what your boss wants you to do.

This can happen in your personal life as well. Have you ever been bullied, or have you witnessed your classmates bullying someone else? This is an extreme version of pressure from others. Some people may use bullying, or peer pressure, as a way of pushing others to commit unethical behaviors, such as illegal drug or alcohol use.

There are many examples of this in business, but the pressure to behave unethically might be most prominent in the financial world.

This article by John Ydstie, "Pressure To Act Unethically Looms Over Wall Street, Survey Finds," explains how many Wall Street workers feel pressured to behave unethically: <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/19/408010692/pressure-to-act-unethically-looms-over-wall-street-survey-finds>.



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- ▲ Sometimes, it's harder to stick by your ethical principles when no one else seems to be acting ethically. Peer pressure, or bullying, is a common cause of unethical behavior.



- **The desire to prove yourself.** Everyone wants to look good. You want your friends to like you and your boss to respect you, right? This is usually a good thing, but sometimes the need for approval or the desire to help out can lead to unethical behavior. For example, imagine that you just started a new job and you really want to impress your boss. However, you're having difficulty getting your work done on time. When your boss asks if you've finished your latest project, you might think about lying to her and telling her that you're finished. You know that this is dishonest, but you may also think that you need to perform well if you want your boss to be impressed. Lying to your boss may temporarily impress her, but you certainly aren't being **transparent**, or communicating openly.



The desire to prove yourself can also lead to ethical dilemmas at school. Let's go back to the cheating example. You probably have a pretty strong desire to get good grades, do well on tests, and impress your teachers, right? For some people, that desire can push them toward unethical behavior. Your ethical principles tell you that cheating is dishonest, but if you're considering cheating to do better in class, then you're facing an ethical dilemma.



- ▲ The desire to prove yourself can lead to unethical behavior, such as lying to your boss or cheating on a test.

In "When Ambition Trumps Ethics," Harvard professor Howard Gardner reflects on a 2012 cheating scandal, when many Harvard students were investigated for cheating on a final exam: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/when-ambition-trumps-ethics/2012/08/31/495c694a-f384-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/when-ambition-trumps-ethics/2012/08/31/495c694a-f384-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html). What do you think of his conclusions? How does this intense academic environment compare to your own school experience?

- **Conflicting values.** You know that being ethical is important, but you also know that not everyone lives by ethical principles. Or, someone may have an ethical code that doesn't necessarily align with yours. A company may have a culture that encourages honesty, but if an employee doesn't think dishonesty is wrong, the entire company may face an ethical dilemma.

Conflicting values can also come into play when people from different cultures interact. Not all cultures have the same ethical beliefs! For example, you probably know that accepting bribes is an unethical method of doing business. But in some countries, bribery is an accepted—and even expected!—part of doing business. And many countries have labor standards that are very different from what you're probably used to. If something that you perceive as unethical is business as usual for others, you might find yourself tempted to make a decision that violates your principles.

Conflicting values may also come up when you're with your friends. Have you ever been friends with someone who doesn't think it's a big deal to steal something small from a store? Your ethical principles tell you that stealing is wrong, but your friend's behavior could put you in an ethical dilemma.

This article, "Talking About Ethics Across Cultures" from Mary C. Gentile, explains best practices when discussing some of the factors behind cultural differences in ethics: <https://hbr.org/2016/12/talking-about-ethics-across-cultures>. In what other ways do you think that conflicting cultural values could create an ethical dilemma?



- ▲ In some cultures, bribery is a more accepted part of business. It is important to recognize that not all people share the same ethical principles.



- **Greed.** There's one simple motivation behind many ethical dilemmas: greed. Essentially, people want things they haven't earned, and they'll do anything to get them. Think about the prevalence of fraud in many industries. While greed isn't the only motivator behind unethical behavior, it often makes people contemplate taking things that aren't theirs. Greed can motivate people to steal from their companies, lie to customers, or resort to bribery and fraud.

But greed doesn't always happen on a large scale. Sometimes, people may feel slighted and think they deserve things that aren't theirs. For example, if an employee believes s/he isn't paid enough, s/he may feel justified in stealing office supplies or pocketing company funds.

In your personal life, greed creates an ethical dilemma when you see money fall out of someone's purse. Do you take the money, even though your ethical principles tell you it would be dishonest and unfair?



This video, "The In-House Ethicist: Is Greed Good?" by John Paul Rollert (<https://review.chicagobooth.edu/strategy/2017/video/house-ethicist-greed-good>), considers the possible benefits of a greed-driven society while still acknowledging that greed is a "poison." What do you think? What examples of greed-driven ethical dilemmas have you seen in the news, movies, or your own life?

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- **Bad role models.** Even if your higher-ups don't explicitly pressure you to behave unethically, they can still put you in ethical dilemmas just by behaving badly. People often model their own behavior after their leaders, whether consciously or unconsciously. This can be a good thing, if the role models in your life demonstrate good behavior. But it also means that if leaders are okay with stealing, lying, or other unethical activity, other people may think it's okay to do unethical things, too.

Think about how you would feel if your boss often took money out of the register. You know that's not the behavior of someone with integrity, but seeing a leader do it can put you in an ethical dilemma.



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This article by John Rampton, "The Importance of Having an Anti-Role Model," highlights ways we can learn about our ethical principles even from unlikely places: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/332608>. Have you ever observed a leader behave unethically?



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- **A lack of consequences.** Ideally, you would act ethically even if no one was watching—that's what it means to have **integrity**. But, the threat of punishment is one reason why most people behave properly. What would happen if someone knew s/he wouldn't be punished for unethical behavior?



◀ Unethical behavior—such as stealing from your company—often stems from greed. In what ways has greed created ethical dilemmas in your own life?

▲ If you know your boss takes money out of the company register occasionally, how would that affect your perspective on whether that behavior is right or wrong?

## Doing the Right Thing

It's clear that we face ethical dilemmas all the time—at work, at school, and in our personal lives. So does this mean we should simply give up and accept that unethical behavior is unavoidable? Definitely not! Although you'll always run into ethical dilemmas, there are several things you can do to ensure you make the right decisions.

- Live according to your ethical code. Keep your ethical principles close to your heart and follow them no matter what.
- Be your own person. It can be tempting to succumb to pressure from others, but remember that you're always in charge of your own decisions.
- Be on your best behavior—even when no one's watching. Having integrity means doing the right thing, even if no one knows about it.
- Think about the long-term repercussions of your actions. What would happen if everyone accepted bribes, stole from their company, or cheated? Think about the **viability** of your actions—how will your behavior affect you, your company, or your school in the long run?
- Follow the law. Many ethical dilemmas involve behavior that's not just unethical, but illegal. Staying on the right side of the law is a big step toward practicing ethical behavior.
- Be trustworthy. Keep your word, do what you say you'll do, and don't gossip.
- Respect others. Remember to respect other people and their property.

Principles  
of Ethics

Viability

Principles  
of Ethics

Rule of Law

Principles  
of Ethics

Trust

Principles  
of Ethics

Respect



- ▲ Doing the right thing can be difficult. Following your values and letting your ethical principles guide you, even when challenging, can help you make the right choices.

## Summary

Causes of ethical dilemmas include pressure from others, the desire to prove yourself, conflicting values, greed, bad role models, and a lack of consequences. You can make the correct ethical decisions by living according to your ethical code, being your own person, being on your best behavior, thinking about the long-term repercussions of your actions, following the law, being trustworthy, and respecting others.

## TOTAL RECALL

1. How can pressure from others create an ethical dilemma?
2. Why is the desire to prove yourself a common cause of ethical dilemmas?
3. Explain how conflicting values can cause ethical dilemmas.
4. How does greed cause ethical dilemmas?
5. How do bad role models create ethical dilemmas?
6. Explain how a lack of consequences can lead to ethical dilemmas.
7. What can you do to ensure you make ethical decisions?

## Make It Pay!

**T**hink about the last time you faced an ethical dilemma. Was it at work, school, home, or with your friends? What caused it? If you made the right decision, how did you do it? If not, what can you do differently the next time you face an ethical dilemma?