

WORKSHOP 1 ETHICS IN THE WORKPLACE

GOALS

- ▶ Understand how the terms “ethical” and “legal” differ.
- ▶ Discover why it can be difficult to make ethical decisions.
- ▶ Learn why it is sometimes not ethical to obey the law.



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A QUESTION OF ETHICS

Communication and Ethics Resources

- Video (41:30)
- CD-ROM Study Guide
- Instructor's Resource CD-ROM
- WebTutor
- ExamView Pro Testing CD-ROM

Do the Right Thing

Responses will vary. Jared has a responsibility to tell his manager about his mistake. The manager may be upset that Jared didn't ask more questions beforehand, but because Jared is new to the job, he will probably tolerate the mistake.

Catherine (Kitty) Genovese was 28 years old when a man stabbed her to death in Queens, New York, in the spring of 1964. Thirty-eight people saw the stabbing, but only one called the police—after Ms. Genovese had died. A spokesperson at the police department said, “There is no legal responsibility, with few exceptions, for any citizen to report a crime.” Why is this story shocking? Because we expect people to do what is right, even if the laws don't require it. Making ethical decisions—choosing “right” over “wrong”—isn't always easy. This workshop explains the difference between “ethical” and “legal” and provides methods for making ethical decisions on the job.

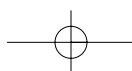
Do the Right Thing

Jared's first week as a cashier at the auto supply store was hectic. One day, Jared realized that he had been giving a large discount for an item that was supposed to be full price. He calculated that he had undercharged a total of \$200.

If Jared told his manager about the mistake, he would get a serious reprimand,

and might even be fired. If he doesn't tell, someone else might be blamed. Jared doesn't want anyone else to take the blame, but he really needs this job. He wonders what decision to make.

 **What would you do if you were Jared?**



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Legal or Ethical: What's the Difference?

Some actions that are perfectly legal are not very ethical. How is that possible? What's the difference between the term "legal" and the term "ethical"?

- **Legal.** The term "legal" refers to laws or rules established by the government. Laws carry penalties for people who violate them. For example, if you drive faster than the speed limit, you are breaking the law, and you can be penalized with fines and points against your driver's license. Laws can guide you in making ethical decisions, but some decisions that are lawful are still unethical.
- **Ethical.** "Ethical" refers to social, religious, or personal values, or to standards of professional behavior. For example, if you lie to your manager about being sick and you take a sick day, your behavior is not illegal, but it is unethical. Acting ethically is about more than just obeying the law—it's about acting decently.

Why Ethical Decisions Aren't Always Easy

People don't always make decisions based on what they think is morally right, because acting ethically often involves penalties. Also, because ethics aren't black and white, it can often be difficult to integrate the moral beliefs of all parties.

- **Consequences.** Sometimes it's difficult to make an ethical decision because of consequences. An ethical decision that you make may conflict with another ethical decision. For example, you may decide that it's your ethical duty to admit to a mistake at work, but you may still be penalized for it or even fired. If you're fired, then you may not be able to support your family, which you feel is another ethical duty.
- **Conflicts with others' ethical standards.** Your own ethical standards may be different from someone else's. For example, you may have an employer who asks you to exaggerate a little on the time it took you to repair a car or a computer. Your own ethical standard tells you not to do that, but your employer tells you that every extra minute charged to the customer brings extra money to the shop and to you.

"In law a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics he is guilty if he only thinks of doing so."

—Immanuel Kant, philosopher

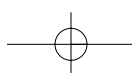
Key Ideas

- ★ **ethical**—conforming to professional standards or to personal, religious, or social values
- ★ **legal**—relating to laws that are established by the government
- ★ **moral**—relating to issues of right and wrong and to how individuals should behave

Tools of the Trade

This workshop explores the difference between legal and ethical actions in the workplace. It also takes a look at why choosing an ethical course of action is not always easy or as clear-cut as it may seem. As a class, review the Key Ideas, definitions, and the guidelines presented in Tools of the Trade.

Note that this guide deals with issues that are often decided by individual cultural, religious, and social values. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the assignments and topics, you may wish to have learners work independently or write reflective journal entries rather than sharing work with peers. Throughout the activities, accept any answer or choice a learner can justify reasonably. When it comes to ethical decision making, there are often no clear right or wrong answers.





INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Segment 1

Every day, working professionals must make difficult ethical decisions on the job. In this segment, you will meet several employees who are involved in ethical predicaments. As you watch the program, think about what you would do if faced with similar dilemmas. Do the scenarios in the video represent ethical dilemmas, legal dilemmas—or both?

Introduction to Ethics in the Workplace

View and discuss
Segment 1: *Introduction to
Ethics in the Workplace*.
Running time: approx. 3:00.



*Lee listens as his coworker
tries to justify her actions.*

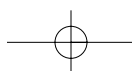
Post-Viewing Questions

1. Lee's coworker proposed theft, which is both unethical and illegal. Lee is faced with an ethical dilemma—he's seen his coworker taking money from the vending machine.
2. This dilemma is not as cut-and-dried as the vending machine dilemma. Workers stand to lose money if they stop the production line. Avoiding the quality problem to make the deadline, however, is unethical. If hiding the problem presents a danger to others, it is also illegal.

Post-Viewing Questions

1. Were the vending machine workers involved in illegal or unethical behavior?

2. Did the safety problem in the production line present a legal or ethical challenge?



DID YOU KNOW?

- ❖ A survey by the *Wall Street Journal* in 1996 showed that 90% of people interviewed considered ethics and values to be very important in building a reputation for good company citizenship.
- ❖ In 1999, Gallup surveys showed that “ethics, morality, and family decline” ranked #1 on the list of what U.S. citizens considered to be the country’s most important problems. It edged out crime, violence, economic problems, and gun control.



Workplace Ethics Around the Globe

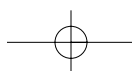
In most countries, executives, employers, and employees are encouraged to behave ethically at work. Though many international workplaces mirror the ethical beliefs of the United States, some have different beliefs about what is ethical on the job.

In the United States, most company executives make employees accountable and responsible for making ethical decisions. In Russia, however, many employees are uncomfortable with being responsible for making ethical decisions in the workplace. Many believe that this reluctance stems from the rigidity of the past Communist government. Before Russia became a free enterprise, the government not only owned the means of production, but also made most decisions regarding its workforce.

When a conflict of interest arises, U.S. employees are expected to maintain loyalty to the company, rather than focus on personal benefit. In Kuwait, individual loyalty lies solely with the Islamic law. Tribal loyalty will influence hiring, employment, or even behavior in the workplace. Loyalty to the Islamic law often overrides direct benefits to the company.

Being on time to work is an ethical imperative in most U.S. workplaces. Some countries in South America, however, feel that being late is not a sign of rudeness or irresponsibility. In Bolivia, punctuality is not a high priority. Bolivian meetings rarely start on time. In Argentina, it is not unusual to keep people waiting, especially if you are regarded as an “important” employee.

U.S. business contracts are serious—and often legally enforced. Once a contract is signed, it is difficult to cancel or even change it. In Russia, the legalities of a contract are not crucial. Russian businesspeople view contracts as statements of intent. These statements may change as the situation changes, which is perfectly fine from a Russian business perspective.



ON THE JOB

A Sizable Dilemma

Chanda is a salesperson at a women's clothing store in a large outlet mall. As an employee of the store, she receives a 30 percent discount on clothes and shoes when they are moved to the sales rack.

On Friday, she notices that her favorite coat is going to be put on sale the following Monday. Only two of the coats remain, and one of them is in her size, a medium.

Chanda wants to buy it, but she doesn't get paid until Wednesday, and the coats are popular enough to be sold out by then. So, she figures out a way to "hold" the coat until Wednesday.

While her manager is at lunch, Chanda takes the coat in her size and places it behind a pile of jeans on a high shelf. In that spot, she thinks, it will be safe until Wednesday.

When Chanda helps open the store on Monday, one of the first customers heads straight for the sales rack and the remaining coat. She tries it on, but she thinks it's a little too big. She asks Chanda if the store possibly has a size medium in the back.

Chanda silently agrees that the coat is too big on the customer, but she doesn't want to give up the smaller size she is hiding. Besides, she thinks, it's not as if the store is losing any money by selling the coat to her instead of to this customer.

Chanda quickly makes a decision. "No," she says. "That's the last coat in that style that we have, but I think it fits you really well. If I were you, I would stick with the large size anyway."

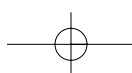
On the Job

A Sizable Dilemma

Chanda's first responsibility should be to her customers and the store. She is being dishonest to the store by hiding the coat, and she is being dishonest to the customer by telling the customer that the wrong size actually fits well. Her actions are unethical. Chanda's rationalization about the store not losing money from selling the coat to Chanda is incorrect. Chanda buys the coat at a 30 percent discount, and the customer buys the coat at full price.



Has Chanda done anything unethical in this situation? Would you have acted differently? Why?



PRACTICE



1. What happens when a person acts on ethical standards that conflict with a law? During the Vietnam War, some men burned their draft cards to protest a war they thought was unethical. Others left for Canada to escape the draft illegally. Before the Civil War, many white Americans and black Americans were morally opposed to the laws allowing slavery in the United States, and therefore broke those laws. With a partner, use the Internet to research one of these examples or one of your own choosing. Find out what happened to people who followed their ethical standards instead of the law. Summarize your findings in a one- to two-page paper.



2. Many companies incorporate their ethical standards into their mission statements. Using the Internet or a local library, find mission statements for at least five companies or organizations. What do these mission statements say about the companies' values and ethical standards? Share your findings with other class members.



3. Re-read Jared's story, "Do the Right Thing," on page 2. If Jared didn't confess to his manager, there was a chance that someone else would be blamed for his mistake. Have you ever been blamed for what someone else did? How did it make you feel? What were the consequences? Describe the situation, and state what you would have done if the roles were reversed.

Practice

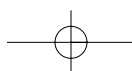
1. Learners' papers should explore how individuals and groups have stuck to their ethical standards in the face of adversity in order to make a statement or a positive change. Additional examples include Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Susan B. Anthony.
2. Companies such as Unilever, Nike, Alcoa, Merck & Co., and UPS speak about corporate citizenship in their goals and mission statements. Encourage learners to consider ethical issues such as safety, environmental responsibility, community involvement, charitable contributions, commitment to diversity, and educational initiatives.
3. Give learners the option of doing this personal activity in a reflective journal entry. Encourage a careful consideration of the consequences of one's actions.

SUMMARY

- Making ethical decisions in the workplace isn't always easy.
- Ethical standards can be based on social, religious, or personal values or professional standards.
- Making an ethical decision sometimes means that you must do more than simply obey the law.

"In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock."

—Thomas Jefferson,
3rd U.S. President



REVIEW QUESTIONS



Review Questions

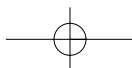
1. Answers might vary slightly. "Ethical" refers to social, religious, or personal values, or standards of professional behavior. "Legal" refers to laws or rules established by the government.
2. The consequences of the decision might be undesirable. Your personal ethical standards might conflict with those of your coworkers or employer.
3. Responses will vary. Admitting to a mistake is an ethical action; arriving to work on time every day is an ethical action. Taking money from a store register is a legal consideration; failing to pay your full-time employees' Social Security taxes is a legal decision.
4. Responses will vary. Some actions that are technically legal can also be unethical.

1. In your own words, describe what is meant by "ethical" and "legal."

2. Why is it sometimes hard to make ethical decisions?

3. Describe two original examples of actions based on ethical decisions, and two original examples of actions based on legal considerations.

4. Why is it sometimes not ethical to simply obey the law?



PROJECTS

1. Describe a time in your life when you had to make an important ethical decision. Did any laws guide your decision? What were the consequences of the decision you made? Would the event have turned out differently if you had chosen the alternative "unethical" decision? Write a story that presents the consequences of choosing the other route. If you like, you may include drawings and illustrations.
2. A "whistle-blower" is an employee who reveals the illegal or unethical actions taken by his or her company or another employee. Some whistle-blowing cases have made headlines in the last few years; some famous cases are even made into movies (e.g., *The Insider*, *Silkwood*). Rent a movie about a whistle-blowing case. Why did the employee(s) "blow the whistle"? What were the consequences? Write a one-page essay defending the actions of the whistle-blowers.

Projects

Have learners complete one or both of the projects as homework or out-of-class assignments. Encourage them to work in pairs or small groups.

1. Give learners the option of doing this personal activity in a reflective journal entry. Encourage a careful consideration of the consequences of the learner's actions and possible alternative outcomes.
2. Learners should explain why the whistleblower took a stand, what difficulties the whistleblower faced as a result, and what kinds of legal protection and job protection were offered to the whistleblower, if any.

Laws can guide you in making ethical decisions, but some decisions that are lawful are still unethical.



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