

Making Informed Ethical Decisions

Business ethics are a hot topic these days. With everything from insider trading to employee theft on the rise, it is no wonder that businesses are beginning to focus on the impact of ethical leadership. Along with this new focus comes a lot of “gray area.” Many times managers are forced to decide on issues where there are arguments on both sides, which makes ethical decision-making very difficult.

Corresponding Events

Business Ethics

Objectives

- Students will practice the steps involved in making ethical decisions.
- Students will work together in a group.
- Students will use consensus to develop solutions.

Materials

- Case Scenarios for role playing and/or ethical dilemma discussions in small groups
- Steps for Making Ethical Decisions

For all scenarios, assume you are employed by Best Computer Systems, a large computer manufacturing company with approximately 1000 employees. The company is located in a large metropolitan area.

CASE 1: Lorna is an administrative assistant in the Human Resources Department. Her good friend, Bill, is applying for a job with the company and she has agreed to serve as a reference for him. Bill approaches her for advice on preparing for the interview. Lorna has the actual interview questions asked of all applicants and considers making him a copy of the list so he can adequately prepare.

CASE 2: Emily works in Quality Control. Once a year, her supervisor gives away the refurbished computers to the local elementary school. No specific records are kept of this type of transaction and Emily really needs a computer for her son who is in college. Her supervisor asks her to deliver 12 computer systems to the school.

CASE 3: Marvin is the secretary in the Facilities Management Department. He has just received a new computer and wants to try it out. Though his supervisor has a strict policy about computer use for business purposes only, he wants to learn the e-mail software more thoroughly than his training can provide. One good way to do this, he figures, is to write e-mail messages to his friends and relatives until he gets the knack of it. He is caught up on all his work and only has 30 minutes left to work today. His supervisor left early.

CASE 4: Richard and Conway are talking in the hallway about the employee benefits program. Conway, who has had some recent financial trouble, explains to Richard how the benefits program has a loophole that will allow him to receive some financial assistance that he really needs to help pay health care costs for his mother. Cathy, a fellow worker, overhears the conversation. Later, Cathy is approached by her supervisor who says he heard a rumor that some people were taking advantage of the company benefits program.

CASE 5: Jennie was recently hired to work as a receptionist for the front lobby. As receptionist, she is responsible for making copies for the associates. Her son, Bruce, comes in and needs some copies for a school project. He brought his own paper and needs 300 copies for his class. If he doesn't bring the copies with him, he will fail the project. The company copier does not require a security key nor do they keep track of copies made by departments.

Steps for Making Ethical Decisions

1. Identify the ethical issue or problem.
2. List the facts that have the most bearing on the decision.
3. Identify anyone who might be affected by your decision and how.
4. Explain what each affected person would want you to do about the issue.
5. List three alternative actions and identify the best and worst case scenario for each alternative, anyone who would be harmed by this choice (and how), any values that would be compromised by selecting this alternative, and any automatic reasons why this alternative should not be selected (legal issues, rules, etc.).
6. Determine a course of action.

Activity Time

One class period. The length of this project is an estimated minimum time needed for completion that may easily be expanded upon.

How to Play

1. Divide students into groups of three or four.
2. Assign each group of students one of the following scenarios to read and discuss.
3. Instruct students to follow the steps for making ethical decisions.

4. Each group should select a feasible alternative and be prepared to discuss their reasoning for selecting that alternative with the class. Other groups should challenge the decision and give appropriate feedback.

Assessments

- Brainstorm careers that interest the students and discuss the related business ethical issues.
- Review the headlines on any given day. Find examples of ethical problems that are reflected in the news. Have the students reflect on how they would respond using an ethical decision making process. Consider how public and peer pressure affects the actual decision making process.

Extensions

After students have discussed their responses to the scenarios, consider the following questions?

1. List one value you feel was reinforced by this dilemma.
2. List one value that you feel you gained from this discussion.