Understanding Ethics

Workshop Guide

Module 9

University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin-Madison, & Purdue University
Understanding Ethics

Workshop Guide

Objectives

Participants will be able to
1. Define ethics and ethical leadership;
2. Identify components of the ethical decision-making process;
3. Identify common justifications and rationalizations used when making decisions;
4. Determine personal decision-making influences in ethical situations.

Materials Needed

- Flipchart & markers
- Blank sheets of paper
- Copies of the following materials for each participant:
  - “Ethics in Leadership”
  - “Ethics in Action Ranking”
  - “Case Studies in Ethics”

Workshop Outline

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Note: Instructions to conduct this workshop are given in italics print. The “script” for a workshop facilitator is given in regular type.

Icebreaker – 10 Minutes – “Ethics in Leadership”

Refer to the “Ethics in Leadership” activity sheet attached to this module to prepare the activity in advance. Give each participant one statement on a quarter sheet of paper. Ask participants to take about two minutes to read the statement, circle “yes” or “no” to the statement, and list two reasons for their answer.

Once it appears the participants are finished writing, ask everyone to stand up. Direct the students who answered “yes” to their statement to move to one side of the room and those who answered “no” to move to the opposite side of the room. Ask a participant on the “yes” side of the room to read his or her statement and describe to the group why he or she said “yes.” Ask other participants who also answered “yes” to the same question to read their reasons for doing so.

Then ask some participants in the “no” group, those who answered “no” to the same statement, to share their reasons. Ask a participant from the “no” side of the room to read a different statement to which he or she answered “no” and provide some reasons for the answer. Ask if anyone on the “yes” side of the room had the same statement, and ask him or her why he or she said “yes.” Involve all participants by asking everyone who had the same statement to share their answers and reasons they identified on their statement sheet. Continue until all statements are read.

Hold a brief discussion about how people can react differently to the same statement based on the way they think and feel about these topics. Ask participants to return to their seats.

Introduction – 5 Minutes

With the disgrace of some of the leaders of large corporations in recent years, ethical practices in business have gotten a great deal of coverage by the media. We might think of ethics in terms of ethics in business or ethics in the medical research field or even ethics in selection of political candidates, but what about ethics as it relates to leadership? How do leaders lead with ethical integrity and encourage others to do the same?

Topic Discussion – 20 Minutes

Ask the group what they think of when they hear the word “ethics.” Allow a few participants to respond, and then summarize or add to what was said. Write some of the responses on the flip chart.

What Is Ethics?

A lot of research has been done and a lot written about ethical practices in business since the 1970s, but research and writing about ethics in leadership are relatively recent. Why teach or talk about ethics in leadership?

Allow a few minutes for participants to respond.

When people are asked “What does leadership means to you?” they frequently describe someone who is trustworthy, honest, or caring, or has a high level of integrity. Such descriptions refer to a person’s “being,” or character, an inner compass that guides a person’s attitudes and behaviors. Without ethical principles, a person may be tempted to do things that serve only his or her own self interest at the expense of others. Can you identify some examples of unethical leadership?

Allow a few minutes for participants to respond.
Josephson (1998) writes that ethics refers to principles that define behavior as right, good, and proper. The terms “ethics” and “values” are not interchangeable. Ethics is concerned with the way a moral person should behave, whereas values are the inner judgments that define how a person actually behaves.

Kidder (1995) explains that standard definitions of ethics have typically included such phrases as “the science of the ideal human character” or “the science of moral duty.” And the word “moral,” derived from the Latin “mos” or “moris,” meaning “manner,” “custom,” “habit,” “way of life,” or “conduct,” typically describes whatever is good or right or proper.

Northouse (2004) reports that the word “ethics” has its roots in the Greek word ethos, which means “customs,” “conduct,” or “character.” Ethics is concerned with the kinds of values and morals an individual or society find desirable or appropriate. In regard to leadership, ethics has to do with what leaders do and who leaders are. “The choices that leaders make and how they respond in a given circumstance are informed and directed by their ethics” (Northouse, 2004).

These definitions have slight differences and many similarities. Conduct, values, morals, and character, and good, proper, and behavior are strong themes throughout.

Northouse and others further delineate the ethical definition into two domains of ethical theories. Conduct theories are composed of consequences (Teleological theories) and duty (Deontological theories). Virtue-based theories involve the character domain.

**Conduct Theories**

**Teleological Theories**

“Teleological” is derived from the Greek “telos,” meaning “ends” or “purposes.” A teleological theory determines right or wrong based on the individual’s conduct that produces a particular outcome. It determines “right” by looking at the results or outcomes. Some concepts used in this theory include the following.

*Ethical egoism*—Actions based on the greatest good for oneself. Example: a manager aspiring to move higher in the company pushing his team to perform the best in order for the manager to get a promotion.

*Utilitarianism*—Actions to create the greatest good for the greatest number. Example: looking at social benefits versus social costs.

*Altruism*—Opposite of ethical egoism. Actions are moral if their primary purpose is to show concern for the best interests of others. Example: Mother Teresa’s work with poor people.

**Deontological Theories**

“Deontological” is derived from the Greek “deos” or “duty.” A deontological theory regards actions as ethical if the action itself is good. Examples include telling the truth, keeping promises, being fair, and respecting others—in other words, “Do the right thing.” Whether an action is good is determined by a duty or obligation to perform the action, for example, telling the truth under oath. The action should also not prevent others from fulfilling their duties or obligations.

**Virtue-Based Theories**

The origins of character or virtue-based theories go back to Aristotle. Character or virtue-based theories focus on who leaders are as people. Moral and ethical leaders demonstrate virtues such as courage, temperance, generosity, and modesty. If you’re a virtuous person, you’re more likely to behave in an ethical way, and the more often you behave ethically, the more virtuous of a person you become.

Our discussion will focus on the conduct theories and look at behaviors and actions, but keep the virtues and character information in mind.
How Do We Make Difficult Decisions?

Kidder (2004) uses three principles for resolving ethical dilemmas or making difficult decisions. Note the similarities with both conduct and character theories in these three principles.

- End-based thinking: “Do what's best for the greatest number of people.”
- Rule-based thinking: “Follow your highest sense of principle.”
- Care-based thinking: “Do what you want others to do to you.”

In “Knowing When a Decision Is Important,” Josephson states that “the greater the potential consequences, the greater the need for careful decision-making.” To help identify important decisions, ask yourself these four questions:

1. Could you or someone else suffer physical harm?
2. Could you or someone else suffer serious emotional pain?
3. Could the decision hurt your reputation, undermine your credibility, or damage important relationships?
4. Could the decision impede the achievement of any important goal?

Activity – 20 minutes – Ethics in Action Ranking

Pass out the “Ethics in Action Ranking” activity sheet to all participants. Break a large group into smaller groups of an even number, 4-6 people each. Ask participants to read the instructions on the worksheet and first complete the ranking individually. Then, have students pair up or work together in their small group and discuss the similarities and differences in their rankings. If there is time, have each small group agree upon a group ranking for all 15 items.

Discuss the rankings with the large group, and compare and contrast individual rankings, small group, or pair rankings. Ask participants to discuss the rationale behind their rankings and some of the thought processes that went into deciding how to rank the items.

Generate specific discussion about the ethical decision-making process that they went through to assign the rankings individually and how their rankings may have changed based on conversations with their partners or group. Relate this discussion to the four questions from Josephson as well as to the conduct and character information discussed earlier in this workshop.

Summarize this activity with the following statements.

1. Individuals make ethical decisions in very different ways. These may be based on the interpretation of the information available, personal values or beliefs, the influence of other people, and many other factors.

2. Individuals often feel something is “right” or “wrong” or “ethical” or “unethical” with varying degrees of intensity.

3. Individuals will make decisions differently in different situations. They may apply ends-based, rule-based, or care-based principles in their decision-making process depending on the situation, information available, and input from others.
In making tough decisions, don’t be distracted by rationalizations. Following are some of the most common ones.

“I deserve this.” Individuals who feel they have participated more than others in classroom discussions, studied harder for exams, or put extra work into a course project may feel they should receive a higher grade in a course.

“It’s Ok. It’s legal.” Legal and ethical are not the same. It may be legal to embellish your resumé to make you look better but not very ethical to brazenly embellish or take credit for someone else’s work to make yourself look better on paper.

“It’s part of the job.” Tasks at work may be somewhat unethical but may seem required by the job or management. Over-billing for a medical procedure that you know an insurance company will pay is an example.

“It’s for a good cause.” Often people put the cause above the action, thinking that because it’s best for most people it’s ok. An example would be overstating the need for funds for a local hunger charity to “guilt” people into donating to the cause.

“I was just trying to protect you.” People sometimes withhold information that might “hurt” someone. This assumes you know how the other person will feel. An example is not sharing with your best friend that you saw his or her partner out on a date with another person.

“Fighting fire with fire” or “Everyone is doing it.” First of all, “everyone” often isn’t “doing it,” that is, doing something unethical. And, if they are, that doesn’t make it right. An example of this is if a friend works the gate at an expensive music concert and offers to let you and a friend in for free.

Activity – 25 Minutes – Case Studies in Ethics

Break the larger group into smaller groups of an equal number of participants. Pass out “Case Studies in Ethics,” and assign one of the three cases to each group. If there are more than three groups, two or more groups can do the same case. Give the following instructions for the activity.

• Read the case individually first, and formulate a decision on your own.
• Discuss the case with group members.
• Answer the questions at the bottom of each case.
• Identify a spokesperson to keep track of what was said.
• When discussing the case, identify the reasoning that goes into answering the case questions, and try to apply some of the theory to how the decision was made.

After the small groups have had adequate time to discuss the cases, bring participants back together. Ask the spokesperson for each case to briefly read or describe the case and then share some of the discussion, theory, and how they solved the case. Discuss each case before moving to the next case study.

After each case has been discussed, facilitate a discussion about how the decisions were made, what they observed in their groups during the discussion, what rationalizations were made, and what theories people used in their decision making.

Summarize this activity with the following comments:

Good leaders conduct themselves well and demonstrate good character. The concept of “ethical fitness” by Kidder (2004) reminds us that we need to practice ethical decision-making, think about it, and discuss it with others so that when a time comes to make a difficult decision we are prepared. Individuals need to achieve ethical fitness and also maintain it. This requires some work—like getting into good shape physically and maintaining that fitness level. Similarly, leaders need to practice decision-making and continue to strive to maintain ethical decision practices.
Don’t expect perfection from any ethical perspective. Ethical approaches, like leaders themselves, have their strengths and weaknesses. Johnson (2005) states that two well-meaning leaders can use the same ethical system and reach different conclusions. Whenever possible, you should practice ethical pluralism by applying more than one perspective to the same problem.

**Reflection, Application, & Summary – 5 Minutes**

Robert K. Greenleaf, who developed the concept of Servant Leadership, articulated five principles of ethical leadership. He believes that ethical leaders:

- Respect others
- Serve others
- Show justice
- Manifest honesty
- Build community

The Servant Leadership concept reflects the definitions of ethics and the actions that ethical leaders can learn, practice, and model. By the time you earn your college degree, you will certainly have heard many people say that prospective employers are looking for leaders. You will also have been exposed to a variety of ethical dilemmas—in your own life, in the world at large, and in professional situations within your own field of study. Take a few moments to reflect on how you will commit yourself to uphold ethical principles in school, work, and your life.

In this workshop, we discussed the concepts of ethics in leadership and ethical decision-making. You had a chance to practice and reflect on the ethical decision-making process. Think about decisions you have made, ones you anticipate having to make in the near future, and decisions others have made and how they affect you personally. Make a commitment to yourself now to practice making ethical decisions in all aspects of your life.

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

- Martin Luther King Jr.
References


Josephson, M. S. “Knowing When a Decision Is Important.” [http://charactercounts.org/michael/2007/03/knowing_when_a_decision_is_imp.html](http://charactercounts.org/michael/2007/03/knowing_when_a_decision_is_imp.html)


Ethics in Leadership

Facilitator instructions: Use the six different statements below to create the icebreaker. Prior to the workshop, copy enough of the statements below so that each participant will have one statement. Cut the statements apart. Give a single statement to each participant, trying to distribute the statements such that several participants will have the same statement. This works best in groups of 18 or more (three participants per statement). Ask participants to take two to three minutes to read the statement and circle “yes” or “no” (no maybes allowed) and then list two reasons for their answer.

Ask all participants who answered “yes” to their statement to go to one side of the room and those who answered “no” to move to the opposite side of the room. Ask one participant to read his or her statement and describe why he or she answered “yes” or “no”; and, using the same statement, ask if anyone on the opposite side of the room had the same statement and the reason why he or she answered differently. Continue to ask for different reasons from both sides, and then move on to the rest of the statements and answers.

Statement 1

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would make personal copies on my work copier.

Yes  No

Reason 1:

Reason 2:
Statement 2

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would borrow an article of clothing from my roommate without asking him or her.

Yes  No

Reason 1:

Reason 2:

Statement 3

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would drive 75 miles/hour on the highway when the posted speed limit is 65.

Yes  No

Reason 1:

Reason 2:
**Statement 4**

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would drive 30 miles/hour in a school zone where the posted speed limit is 20.

Yes  No

Reason 1:  

Reason 2:  

**Statement 5**

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would work with a group of classmates on an assignment even though the instructor asked us to do the work individually.

Yes  No

Reason 1:  

Reason 2:  
Statement 6

Instructions: Read the statement below. Circle “yes” or “no” for each statement, and, in the space provided, list two reasons for your “yes” or “no” answer.

I would tell my instructor if I saw someone cheating on an exam during class.

Yes  No

Reason 1:

Reason 2:
**Ethics in Action Ranking**

*Instructions:* Each of the 15 statements below could be considered unethical. Rank them in order of the most unethical (1) to the least unethical (15). Complete your ranking individually first. If time and circumstances permit, create a group ranking with a partner or team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Ranking</th>
<th>Individual Ranking</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Stealing from the university bookstore</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Looking on someone else's test for answers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lying to your friend about what you did the previous evening</td>
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<td>Keeping a palm pilot you found on the ground that has its owner's identification</td>
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<td>Skipping class and telling your instructor that a relative passed away</td>
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<td>Lying to a police officer</td>
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<td>Taking $10 from your roommate's dresser without asking</td>
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<td>Returning clothing to a store after you wore it</td>
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<td>Not telling your significant other that you went out with someone else</td>
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<td>Not reporting that you witnessed your best friend slash someone's car tire</td>
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<td>Taking office supplies home from your work place</td>
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<td>Tripping someone to watch them fall down a few stairs</td>
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<td>Spiking a person's drink at a party</td>
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<td>Spending money, sent by your parents for a haircut, on alcohol</td>
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<td>Spreading rumors that are untrue about someone you dislike</td>
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Case Studies in Ethics

Case 1: Slot Machine Winner
A friend gives you a roll of coins to play the slots during your vacation to Mexico, asking you to split anything you win with his money. After losing $100 of your own money, you play the first of his coins and hit a $10,000 jackpot.

Do you apologize to him for losing his roll of coins, or do you split the money?

Case Study 2: Heinz Dilemma
In Europe, a woman was near death from cancer. One drug might have saved her, a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The druggist was charging $2,000, ten times what the drug had cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or to let him pay later. But the druggist refused. The husband got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should the husband have stolen the drug? Why or why not?

Case Study 3: Delta Fraternity Theft
Delta Fraternity, renowned for its clever pranks, was recently reported to have stolen Alpha fraternity's 2007 Homecoming Trophy, Founding Father's Paddle, and Ornate Wooden Crest from their front room. Alpha is not a well-liked fraternity on campus, given their exclusiveness and attitude. Moreover, thefts such as this have occurred before, but previous stolen items were not as valuable as their Founding Father's Paddle (over 100 years old) and Ornate Wooden Crest (estimated at over $4,000).

The campus police and university conduct officers investigated and found that “the evidence, while it supports the concept of a neighboring fraternity as the culprit, is not conclusive,” and the investigation continued. During an interview of Delta's president, he admitted that Delta had, in fact, taken these things from Alpha. He pointed out, however, that he had only been made aware of this three days ago. When asked why he did not act immediately, he replied, “I felt we should discuss this first in a chapter meeting.” At their meeting last night, however, membership discovered that the Ornate Wooden Crest had been cut apart by members trying to hide it into a small storage closet. Delta's membership decided to not do anything with the offending members and not speak of the theft again.

Should the president of Delta have contacted authorities immediately when he learned of the theft? Why or why not? When he learned of the property being destroyed, should he have alerted authorities or taken some other action?

Adapted from a case Andrew Bowman created for an Ethics and Conflict Management program at the University of Illinois, 2008.
Leadership in Action is a multi-state leadership development program for college-age students. It was funded in part by an USDA/CSREES HEP Challenge Grant, 2005-2009 to the University of Illinois, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Undergraduate students from those universities participated in a 21-month program during which the workshop modules were developed, used during the two cohort programs, reviewed, and revised.

We intend that students who have been trained in conducting effective workshops use these materials for leadership workshops with various student organizations. The materials can be used separately for individual workshop sessions, in any combination for a short-term program, or in their entirety for a long-term program.

Leadership in Action Curriculum Team
Janet Ayres, Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University
Lisa Burgoon, Student Leadership Program Coordinator, Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois
Christina Klawitter, Assistant Dean, College of Agricultural & Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin - Madison
John Klatt, Associate Student Services Coordinator, College of Agricultural & Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Marianne Lorensen, Visiting Leadership Program Coordinator, Human & Community Development, University of Illinois
Charles Olson, Assistant Dean of Academic Programs, Agricultural Consumer & Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois
Robbie Ortega, Graduate Student, Youth Development and Agricultural Education, Purdue University

Understanding Ethics Development Team
Lead Author: Lisa Burgoon, University of Illinois
Editor: Laura Hoelscher, Purdue University
Designer: Russell Merzdorf, Purdue University