

THE ETHICAL PRACTITIONER COLUMN#1

Dilemmas and Moral Questions: The Heart of Ethical Decision Making

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And

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When bad things happen, they often come to our attention as dilemmas – that is, situations where we must choose between two equally repugnant choices. You know the killer question, “Are you still beating your wife or just being arrogant and obstructive?” or “Did your company do this intentionally, maliciously, or negligently?” If you choose their side, there will be serious litigation and perhaps permanent reputational damage. On the other hand, if you choose the other side, there’ll be embarrassment, humiliation, and continued investigations.

Bad situations generally have a moral dimension that needs to be addressed. Most ethicists and moral advisors will tell you that there are questions that need to be asked promptly to assess the moral dimension of any situation or problem. Asking early can trigger prompt, appropriate action as warranted. Here are the kinds of moral questions you can use to assess appropriate ethical behavior:

- What did they know and when did they know it?
- Has all the information been presented honestly and correctly?
- What are the relevant facts of the situation?
- What decisions were made?
- Who was involved/affected?
- What was sacrificed to benefit the victims?
- Was there a serious attempt to find out?
- What alternative actions were available?
- Is the action or situation truly reflective of a responsive community citizen?
- Are our actions open, honest, and truthful?
- What affirmative action is being taken now to remedy or remediate the situation?
- Did this happen because there is an institutional “code of silence” when morally questionable decisions or actions come to light?
- How will future unethical behavior be disclosed? To whom? How fast?
- As an organization, are we prepared to combat the behaviors that lead to ethical compromises?
- What lessons can the organization learn as this dilemma is resolved?
- Who does our ethical behavior bother?
- What ethical principles or standards of conduct are involved or at issue?
- Is it really our problem?

- How would these principles be advanced or violated by each alternative action?
- What was the fundamental cause – omission, commission, negligence, neglect, accident, arrogance, other?
- How could this have been avoided?
- Are all the critical ethical questions being asked and answered?

Failure to ask questions can be considered ethical failure by omission. Ask the right questions early as suspect situations are developing. You may be able to head off serious difficulty or perhaps even enhance the value of your decisions and actions.