

Five Stages of Ethical Action

Barbara C. Thornton, Ph.D.

Revised by Sally P. Hardwick, MS

Health Ecology, University of Nevada, Reno

Ethical *action* is different from ethical decision-making. It takes preparation, assessing, deciding, implementing and reflection. Here is an outline of steps that are helpful for individuals or groups.

STAGE ONE: PREPARATION

Every decision takes some thought and organization before the decision is made. In order to create an atmosphere in which effective decisions can be made and implemented the following is helpful, when at all possible:

1. *Identify the Issues*

In order to begin to consider it, determine what general issues are involved. Is it a health issue, justice issue, educational issue, economic issue. Usually there are at least several issue involved. Getting an idea of them before you begin will help focus the dialogue.

2. *Preparing the Environment*

Create an atmosphere of caring as you deliberate. Be sure the location and atmosphere is conducive to honest, open discussion. Try to eliminate or reduce as far as possible, any potentially coercive influences.

3. *Preparing Yourself*

Be aware of your personal prejudices, feelings and stress level as you respond. Be honest with yourself about how those factors can affect your decision-making ability.

4. *Preparing Others*

Identify those involved with the ethical problem and involve them in the decision-making as appropriate. Cooperation will be better assured if those involved in the outcome are included in the process. Listen to their stories before you proceed. Being sensitive to the needs of all involved.

STAGE TWO: ASSESS

Facts are different than value and policy issues although these three matters often become confused. They need to be identified particularly when the decision is an ethical one. In order to determine the pertinent facts and values, it is important to first determine the type(s) of ethical problem(s) involved. Ask yourself:

1. *What type of ethical problem(s) is involved?*

Is it an ethical dilemma, ethical stress, a matter of the locus of authority and/or a justice issue? By determining the type of problem and the issues involved (Stage 1, Step 1) it will be easier to identify the facts and values relevant to the case.

2. *What are the relevant facts?*

Identify only those facts pertinent to the case and its resolution, and present them without judgment or bias.

3. *What are the relevant values?*

Identify the values involved: The type of problem will help identify the types of values. For example, a dilemma will necessitate identifying supportable but opposing actions; issues of justice will require looking at the type of justice involved (distributive vs. non-comparative) and any possible distribution methods of that justice. Identify what appropriate ethical principles, values and virtues should be utilized in making this decision? Are there obligations and duties owed?

4. *What policy concerns should be considered?*

What laws, regulations, policies, etc. are applicable to the case? How might they impact the decision-making and the outcome?

STAGE THREE: DECIDE

Ethical decision-making is not easy, but many problems can be solved with creativity and thought. Using the fact, value and policy issues that you identified in the assessment, do the following:

1. Gather as many creative solutions as possible. Use brainstorming where you don't evaluate suggestions (your own or others) until the end of the idea-generation process.
2. Evaluate the suggested solutions until you come up with the most usable ones. Then identify the ethical and political consequences. Remember, you can't turn your ethical decision into action if you are not realistic regarding the constraints of institutions and political systems. When possible, arrive at your decision by consensus so that others will support the action.
3. Identify the best solution. If there are no workable solutions, be prepared to say so and say why. If ethics can't be implemented because of politics someone needs to know. If there are no answers because the ethical dilemma is unsolvable the appropriate people need to know that also.

STAGE FOUR: IMPLEMENT YOUR DECISION

Ethics without action is just talk. In order to act make sure that you communicate what needs to be done:

1. Share your individual or group decision with the appropriate parties. Where possible seek their cooperation.
2. Implement the decision.

STAGE FIVE: REFLECTION

Perfect ethical decisions are seldom possible. However, we can learn from past decisions and try to make them better in the future, particularly when they lead to policy making. To do this:

1. In a caring atmosphere, review the data and the ramifications of the decision.
2. Review the process of making the decision. Would you do it in the same way next time? Were the appropriate people involved? Was the process of implementation effective?
3. Should the decision become policy or do you need more cases and data before that step should occur?
4. Learn from your successes as well as your mistakes.
5. Be prepared to review your decision at a later time if the facts or issues change.