



# Unit - 4

# COMMON ETHICAL DILEMMAS

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the difference between ethics and morals
- ✓ Understand the value of ethics

## Unit 4

### Common Ethical Dilemmas

#### Dilemmas with Company Policy

##### Common Dilemmas

It sounds unlikely, but it is possible that company policy will place you in an ethical dilemma.

For example, let's say that you're an insurance broker. Your company's operations manual states that you must always provide the customer with the lowest quote you have obtained. You know that the company that always offers the lowest quote has terrible customer service and has a history of denying legitimate claims. You also know that their quote does not include taxes and service fees, but both your company's policy and the insurance company's policy forbids you from telling customers this.

Most people would see two solutions to this problem: find another job or learn to live with the policy. However, there is a third option: be the catalyst for change.

##### The Third Option

You should bring the ethical issues about the policy to the attention of your supervisor. For example, perhaps s/he is not aware of the issues with the lowest-bidding company. Make sure this discussion takes place in private at a good time for both of you, when you can sit down and fully discuss the issue. You'll also want to phrase your concerns in a way that doesn't blame anyone.

For example, you might want to say, "I've come across a possible issue with our quoting policy that's making me a bit uncomfortable. We've agreed to always provide the lowest quote to customers, but the company that provides the lowest quote has a reputation for some unethical practices. As well, there are some hidden fees that may actually mean they're not the lowest provider."

Remember that supervisors want to hear about solutions as well as problems, so before you meet, try to come up with some ways that the dilemma can be resolved.

In this example, you might suggest that your company revise their policy so that you can provide several quotes to your customers. You might also request that your company meet with the insurance company in question to clarify their fee structure and to request that your company be allowed to share all information with customers.

#### Dilemmas with Co-Workers

## Potential Dilemmas

Another common source of ethical dilemmas in the workplace is our co-workers. There are three common types of situations in this category.

### **You've found out something that a co-worker should know, but you can't tell him/her.**

Here's a classic dilemma: you and your best friend work for the same company. She's pregnant and she and her husband are planning to buy a house. You've just found out, however, that there's a 75% chance that she will be laid off in the next six months.

### **Your co-worker asks you to do something unethical.**

It's Thursday night, 9 p.m., and you and your colleague are putting the final touches on a key report for a 9 a.m. meeting. You notice that some crucial numbers are missing. Your colleague says, "Let's just put in some likely numbers; we can always pass it off as a mistake by the data entry department later."

### **You see a co-worker doing something unethical.**

You work for a small programming company. The company prides itself on developing all its code by hand and in fact mandates that its staff do so. You recently saw one of your colleagues, who has been with the company a long time, pulling code from a competitor's application.

These types of situations are the ones that you will encounter often in the workplace. This is why it is so important to be "ethically fit," as Rushworth Kidder puts it. You need to know where you stand on ethical issues, what your values and principles are, and how you will solve ethical dilemmas, so that when these issues arise you have a framework for dealing with them.

## Case Studies

### Scenario One

You and your best friend work for the same company. She's pregnant, so she and her husband are planning to buy a house. You've just found out, however, that there's a 75% chance that she will be laid off in the next six months.

### What is the main issue?

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**What values come into play when making a decision?**

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**What tools would you use to solve the problem?**

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**What potential solutions do you see?**

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**Are there any possible problems with your solutions?**

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**How would you implement those solutions?**

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## Scenario Two

It's Thursday night, 9 p.m., and you and your colleague are putting the final touches on a key report for a 9 a.m. meeting. You notice that some crucial numbers are missing. Your colleague says, "Let's just put in some likely numbers; we can always pass it off as a mistake by the data entry department later."

**What is the main issue?**

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**What values come into play when making a decision?**

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**What tools would you use to solve the problem?**

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**What potential solutions do you see?**

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**Are there any possible problems with your solutions?**

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**How would you implement those solutions?**

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**Scenario Three**

You work for a small programming company. The company prides itself on developing all its code by hand and in fact mandates that its staff do so. You recently saw one of your colleagues, who has been with the company a long time, pulling code from a competitor's application.

**What is the main issue?**

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**What values come into play when making a decision?**

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**What tools would you use to solve the problem?**

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**What potential solutions do you see?**

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**Are there any possible problems with your solutions?**

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**How would you implement those solutions?**

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**Scenario Four**

You work for a small courier company. Part of your contract stipulates that if you are involved in an accident or convicted of a driving offence, you must inform the company immediately, even if it is outside working hours. Recently, one of your co-workers took an unexpected one-week vacation. You've heard through the grapevine that he was convicted of driving under the influence, lost his license for a week, and was therefore unable to work. However, he told the company that he had a family emergency and did not report his conviction.

**What is the main issue?**

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**What values come into play when making a decision?**

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**What tools would you use to solve the problem?**

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**What potential solutions do you see?**

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**Are there any possible problems with your solutions?**

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**How would you implement those solutions?**

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## Dilemmas with Clients

### Potential Dilemmas

Clients can sometimes request that we do something unethical for a number of reasons: to get them a better airline seat, to get them a better deal, or even just to give them the service they think they deserve. They can also do so unintentionally; for example, by asking you to share confidential information to help them make a decision.

These are also the types of decisions that require you to be ethically fit. Know where your line is (and your company's line). Having a mental process in place to address these ethical decisions is crucial to your survival.



Let's look at some ways that you can address ethical dilemmas caused by your supervisor.

### **Plan A**

Let's say that your supervisor casually asks you to sign some documents for him. You feel that this is unethical, so you simply say, "I'm not really comfortable doing that." Your supervisor may not have been aware that his/her request was unethical, and they may retract the request. This simple process works in many cases.

### **Plan B**

If Plan A didn't work, or you said yes and then changed your mind, or if you asked for some more time to think about the request, then it's time to proceed to Plan B: a sit-down meeting.

First, make sure that the discussion takes time at the appropriate time and place. If there's a pressing decision that needs to be made that may become an ethical dilemma, take five minutes, and at least make your supervisor aware of it. Otherwise, try to have a sit-down meeting in a private area so that you have time to fully air your issues without interruption.

Then, paraphrase your supervisor's request. Say something like, "I understand that you wanted me to supply figures for that report due this afternoon." When your boss hears another way of phrasing it, s/he may immediately retract their request.

If the supervisor doesn't retract his/her request, say no again. This time, you need a more complete statement with these parts:

- "I really don't feel comfortable doing that."
- Explain your understanding of the situation and the aspects of the dilemma. Take the opportunity to ask questions.
- Explain why you don't feel comfortable with the situation.
- Explain that you are trying to protect the reputation of everyone involved (yourself, your boss, and the company.)
- Define what you expect ethically.
- Provide some solutions that would meet your ethical principles and that would be agreeable to the supervisor and the company.
- Ensure you and your supervisor commit to a plan of action.
- Thank your supervisor for listening to you and giving you the opportunity to air your thoughts.

During the discussion, make sure you:

- Don't become defensive or emotional.
- Stay on track.
- Don't put your boss or the company down.
- Try not to judge, accuse, or criticize.
- Don't compromise your ethical principles; do compromise on solutions (as long as they are ethically acceptable).
- Stop talking when you've made your points.

**Plan C**

If you've had a sit-down with the boss and s/he still wants you to behave unethically, it's time for Plan C.

First, reconsider the situation. Make sure you are committed to seeing this thing through, even if it comes down to losing your job. Can you live with the situation as it is or is it worth the fight?

Once you have established your commitment to this moral dilemma, it's time to swing into action. First, talk to another supervisor (at the same level or higher) or to your Human Resources department to get their perspective on the situation. Make sure you document the who, what, where, when, and why of each person you talk to about the situation. Above all, stick to the facts. Focus on the dilemma, its potential consequences, and your ethical concerns. If the dilemma still is not resolved within your ethical boundaries, it's time to get a lawyer. Your next avenues of disagreement are drastic: sue the employer, go to the media or other government agencies, or quit.

**Dilemmas as a Supervisor**

Unfortunately, the burden of ethics often falls most heavily on those in power. Supervisors are often placed in ethical dilemmas, caught between their supervisors and their staff, or between the needs of the client and their staff. Supervisors also have the responsibility of setting a good ethical example for their employees. And, supervisors are often less closely policed than lower-level staff. Many supervisors see their elevated position as a reason to bend the rules to their advantage.

**What are some potential ethical dilemmas that supervisors may face?**

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**Boost your self-esteem.**

Focus on your good qualities. Think about the weak areas of your self-image. If you'd like to feel more competent at work, read some books or attend some workshops. Try to solve some small problems to rebuild your confidence. And, make sure you seek support in your social network.

**Reconnect.**

If there are issues lingering from your mistake, address them by acknowledging the problem, admitting your responsibility, apologizing (if necessary and sincere), explain, and ask for another chance.

For example, you might say something like: "I sense that there's an issue between us and I want to clear the air if I can. I feel like this is my fault because I falsified those figures. I'm sorry that I did it and I wish I had made a different decision. I did it because I felt I had to; I didn't think it through. I want to have the same working relationship we did before."

**Get on with your life.**

If your work relationships can be repaired, then work towards that. And if things don't quite return to the same way, or you feel that your co-workers can't get over it, it may be time to look for a new job.

**Taking Your Moral Temperature, Part Two**

Staff Training Solutions

**Instructions**

At the beginning of this course, we asked you to decide how you would respond to some moral dilemmas. Now that we've talked about some decision-making processes and some different perspectives, we'd like you to think again about how you would respond to these situations. As well, write down the things you considered when making your decision.

**Scenario One**

Your supervisor is home sick. He called you to ask you to tell anyone that asks that he is on a business day trip.

**What would you do?**

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**Scenario Two**

You have found out that a particular team in your company will be laid off in six months. This is completely confidential and you're not supposed to know. However, your best friend is on that team. She just found out that she is pregnant, so she and her husband are planning to buy a home in the next few months.

**What would you do?**

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**Scenario Three**

Money is tight and your spouse's birthday is coming up. One of your clients offered you free tickets to a major gala coming up, complete with a hotel room. The problem is that your company prohibits accepting these kinds of gifts.

**What would you do?**

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**Scenario Four**

Two people on your team are secretly having an affair. They're both married and company policy prohibits inter-office dating.

**What would you do?**

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### A Look Back

Now, turn back **to Session Three**, where you originally looked at these situations. How are your responses different? Are any the same? What changed?

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Further Reading: