



Ethical Decision-Making Strategies

There are a number of frameworks that leaders can use to make an ethical decision when faced with a dilemma. Most of them contain a similar series of steps along with clarifying questions to help guide the decisions. Below is a framework adapted from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

Ethical Decision-Making Framework

Identify

- Does the problem at hand require an ethical analysis?
- Could this decision or situation be damaging to someone or to some group, or unevenly beneficial to people?
- Does this decision involve a choice between a good and bad alternative, or perhaps between two “goods” or between two “bads”?
- Is this issue about more than solely what is legal or what is most efficient? If so, how?

Investigate

- Am I aware of military regulations and/or policies that may be relevant to the situation?
- What facts are known/not known? Can I learn more about the situation? Do I know enough to make a decision?
- What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Are the concerns of some of those individuals or groups more important? Why?
- What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? Have I identified creative options?

Evaluate

- Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Lens)
- Which option treats people fairly, giving them each what they are due? (The Justice Lens)
- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm for as many stakeholders as possible? (The Utilitarian Lens)
- Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Lens)
- Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (The Virtue Lens)
- Which option appropriately takes into account the relationships, concerns, and feelings of all stakeholders? (The Care Ethics Lens)



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Plan

- After an evaluation using all of these lenses, which option best addresses the situation?
- If I told someone I respect (e.g., those in my chain of command) which option I have chosen, what would they say?
- How will this decision reflect on the mission/my service branch/unit/me as an individual?
- How can my decision be implemented with the greatest care and attention to the concerns of all stakeholders?

Implement

- How did my decision turn out, and what have I learned from this specific situation?
- What feedback did I receive from my superiors?
- What (if any) follow-up actions should I take?
- How will I use what I learned to make better decisions in the future?

Additional Strategies:

Messervey et al. (2023) suggest some additional strategies (e.g., goal setting, affect labeling, and perspective taking) to help overcome the negative effects of stress on ethical decision making. When under stress, especially in an operational environment, you are more likely to engage in automatic processing rather than slow deliberate analysis. Highly charged emotional states can make it easier to make an unethical decision. Research suggests there are steps you can take to counteract these tendencies.

Goal Setting

First, before your unit deploys into a dangerous operational setting, consider the situations you may encounter and imagine how you might ethically deal with them. Set some goals for how you hope to respond.

For example, you can set intentions such as, “If situation X occurs, perform action Y.” For example, “if detainees try to escape, we will use no more force than necessary to prevent them from escaping.”

Having set this goal in advance of the stressful situation may help the group resolve the situation in the heat of the moment in a way that is most ethical. It is not possible to anticipate all ethical situations that could possibly occur, but setting goals as a group can increase follow-through on moral intentions.





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Affect Labeling

Labeling one's emotions can reduce the intensity of stress, making it easier to make an ethical decision in the heat of the moment.

For example, you might say, "I feel angry because some individuals on my team are not pulling their weight, and I am always picking up the slack." Labeling your anger might make you feel calm enough to have a conversation about the issue and resolve it rather than taking out your frustration on them (e.g., intimidating them with belligerent behavior).

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is another way to reduce the intensity and duration of emotions. For example, on a peace-keeping deployment, you might consider the perspective from noncombatants: "The United States is occupying our land, so they can impose their way of life on us." Similarly, you might imagine a day in the life/the daily hardships of the local people.





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References

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. (2021, November 8). *A framework for ethical decision making*. Santa Clara University. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>

Messervey, D. L., Peach, J. M., Dean, W. H., & Nelson, E. A. (2023). Training for heat-of-the-moment thinking: Ethics training to prepare for operations. *Armed Forces & Society*, 49(3), 593–611. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221088325>

