

# Ethical Decision Making

By Lieutenant Commander Jeffrey L. Pottinger, SC, USN, Training Officer, Navy Supply Corps School, Athens, GA

**E**thics is a hot topic today. Take a look at any recent newspaper, news magazine or business periodical and the pages are filled with articles, most of them outlining various moral breaches - bribe taking, influence peddling, sex scandals, to name a few. The slant of most of these articles is toward right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, black vs. white and the various shades of gray. Unfortunately, we all have different opinions about the various shades of gray, and our definition of what's moral.

We come from different backgrounds, social cultures and educational experiences. Our core values are different and it's these core values which determine whether we view a particular action or decision as a moral breach or an ethical dilemma. That's why public opinion polls on many of these ethics "violations" are not unanimous. Some of us don't personally see these actions as morally wrong (or right!). So, if our values differ, how can we determine whether our decisions are ethical or unethical?

Our ethics are judged by our actions, and our actions result from a choice or decision on real issues. Unfortunately, most of us (including the newspapers) focus on the decision itself when we try to determine whether an action was ethical or unethical.

If you followed my logic in the first paragraph, it should be obvious that our opinions will differ when it comes to the actual decision. In our day-to-day decision making, how can we avoid this trap? Maybe we shouldn't focus our attention on the results. Current "total quality" thinking focuses on improving the process rather than fixing the mistake. Maybe we should focus on the decision making process.

Tom Peter's stated in a recent article, "Ethics is not about headline issues....

Ethical concerns surround us all the time, on parade whenever we deal with people in the course of an average day." (See Note 1) I couldn't agree with him more. Each day we make many decisions, each having an ethical impact. They have an ethical impact simply because they affect others, normally those with whom we work every day. Each decision we make creates harms and benefits to those affected by the decision, whether they be as earth shattering as the Tylenol poisoning case, or as simple as rearranging office furniture. To avoid the pitfalls of evaluating our decision after it's made, we need a tool to help us make our decision.

A simple, but effective, tool is a harms/benefit analysis (see note 2). Very simply, you create a matrix. On the top, you list each of the parties that have a stake in the decision. Along the side, list the alternative solutions. In each of the boxes, indicate whether the particular alternative, harms or benefits the individual stakeholders. Once completed, analyze the matrix and select the option that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the harms.

Of course it's not as simple as this. You must spend some time looking at the problem/decision, particularly the stakeholders and the options. Spend time identifying who will be affected by the decision and all the alternatives to solving the problem. Look for the not so obvious. Often, our decisions have an impact on others we didn't consider, or have ramifications that were unintended.

Once the basic matrix is constructed, the difficult step begins. As we look at whether an action harms or benefits a particular stakeholder, we must look at the decision objectively and place ourselves in their shoes. This may mean discussing the issue directly with the stakeholders, getting a better picture of the impact on them. Once the blocks are

filled in, we must make the decision. The basic rule - maximize benefits/minimize harms - doesn't mean selecting the option with the "most" benefits and/or the "least" harms. We must look at the relative severity of the harms and the relative significance of the benefits. Some harms are so drastic (death in the case of the Tylenol poisonings) that we should not even consider that alternative.

Conversely, some benefits are so great that the numerous "minor" harms pale when viewed along side them. Once the decision is made, you might consider discussing it with the stakeholders. This final step serves 2 key functions. First, it helps ensure the not so obvious ramifications aren't overlooked, and secondly, it shows the stakeholders you've put a lot of thought into the decision.

The purpose of this article was not to discuss morals and ethics from a right vs. wrong perspective. We can read enough of that in any journal or periodical we pick up. Rather, I chose to provide one tool that can be used in improving the decision making process. And, if we remember, total quality management (TQM) focuses on improving the product through the process. By applying the TQM method to decision making, we can improve our decisions by focusing on the decision making process.

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**Note 1:** *Ethics Digest*, Vol. 6, No. 6, Olsson Center for Applied Ethics, The Darden School, University of Virginia, December 1989.

**Note 2:** *The general idea used in this article and the harms/benefits analysis are ideas learned from a course on Business Ethics taught by Professor R. Edward Freeman at the University of Virginia.*