

# Ethical Decision-making Worksheet

Case: \_\_\_\_\_

Most relevant facts?

<b>Professional Issues?</b>	<b>Legal/Policy Issues?</b>	<b>Ethical Issues?</b>

**Stakeholders?** Persons/groups directly affected by your decision and what they have at stake.

**Possible actions?** List one or two of the most likely actions you can take, then ask the questions below.

<b>Consequences:</b> Which option produces the most good, least harm?	<b>Individual Rights/Fairness:</b> Which option best respects the rights of all parties; treats all fairly?	<b>Common Good:</b> Which option advances personal/company/social values/virtues?

**Final Decision?**

# The Basics of Ethical Decision-making

Ethics or morality poses questions about how we ought to act and how we should live. It asks, "According to what standards are these actions right or wrong?" It asks, "What character traits (like honesty, compassion, fairness) are necessary to live a truly human life?" It also asks "What concerns or groups do we usually minimize or ignore? And why might that be?" Admitting our blindness is the beginning of vision.

## 1. What are the ethical issues?

An ethical issue is present when a decision raises a question in a person's mind about whether the decision is consistent with the person's own moral standards or with the moral standards most people would accept. Such questions, for example, may include whether the decision wrongly harms people, whether the decision wrongly infringes on people's rights, or whether the decision wrongly treats people unfairly. Ethical issues are not the same as legal or professional issues. Legal issues are questions that are raised about whether an action or a decision is consistent with the legal standards embodied in the law, while professional issues are questions that are raised about whether a decision is consistent with the principles of a particular profession. A single decision may simultaneously raise ethical, legal, and professional questions and so may involve all three kinds of issues.

## 2. Who are the stakeholders?

A stakeholder is any person or group that will be directly and significantly affected by a decision. Typical groups of professional stakeholders include: teachers, parents, government entities, media, police/fire officials, politicians, children, healthcare workers, citizens, etc. Persons who will be negligibly affected by a decision should not be counted as stakeholders.

## 3. What is the ethically appropriate decision?

There are four main kinds of ethical standards.

- a. **Consequences:** What are the over-all benefits and harms that a potential decision will impose on everyone? Which decision will produce the most good for all stakeholders and do the least harm?
- b. **Individual's rights:** What rights do individuals have that others must protect? Which decision best respects the rights and dignity of all parties? How justly (or fairly) does each decision distribute benefits and burdens among people? What relevant moral reasons can be advanced for treating people differently? Even if not everyone gets all they want, will everyone still be treated fairly?
- c. **Common Good:** Which action promotes the common good and helps all to participate more fully in the goods we share as a society, as a community, as a school or other institution, as a family? Which promotes values and goals we hold in common?
- d. **Virtues:** Which action enables the deepening and development of those virtues or character traits that we value as individuals? as a profession? as a society? Such values (like integrity) help all to flourish.

## 4. Are there any obstacles that stand in the way?

Pressures and obstacles sometimes lie in the way of doing what is right. For example, are there any laws, policies, or professional practices that are obstacles to doing what is right? Are there any pressures from individuals, personal risks and hardships, or personal financial constraints that stand in the way? Are there any significant uncertainties that may cast doubt on the reliability of one's ethical conclusions? Sometimes what looks like the most ethical course of action may be the course of action that is truly impossible to implement. No one can be obligated to do what he or she cannot do, but a decision about the impossibility of moral action should never be easy.

# APPROACHING ETHICS

## THE UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE (Question 3a)

- Focuses on the consequences that actions or policies have on the well-being ("utility") of all persons directly or indirectly affected by the action or policy.
- The principle states: "Of any two actions, the most ethical one will produce the greatest balance of benefits over harms."

## THE RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE (Question 3b)

- Identifies certain fundamental civil, political and economic rights that merit protection or respect because they pertain to the dignity of the human person.
- Each person has a fundamental right to be respected and treated as a free and equal rational person capable of making his or her own decisions.
- Examples of rights that are traditionally recognized in this approach include: the right to privacy, autonomy, the right to subsistence, freedom of conscience, the right to physical integrity, etc.
- The principle states: "Act in ways that respect the dignity of other persons by honoring or protecting their legitimate moral rights."

## THE FAIRNESS (OR JUSTICE) PERSPECTIVE (Question 3b)

- Focuses on how fairly or unfairly our actions distribute benefits and burdens among the members of a group.
- Fairness requires consistency in the way people are treated.
- Examples of what is offered as morally justifiable reasons for treating people differently: need, merit, effort, fault, etc.
- The principle states: "Treat people the same unless there are morally relevant differences between them."

## THE COMMON GOOD PERSPECTIVE (Question 3c)

- Presents a vision of society as a community whose members are joined in a shared pursuit of values and goals they hold in common.
- The community is comprised of individuals whose own good is inextricably bound to the good of the whole.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what advances the common good."

## THE VIRTUE PERSPECTIVE (Question 3d)

- Focuses on attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our human potential.
- Examples: honesty, courage, faithfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, compassion, etc.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what develops moral virtues in ourselves and our communities."