

It Was Just A Thought . . .

The Truth About The Truth And How We Lose It
by Kyle Hargrove

Have you ever asked the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” It would be hard to imagine that any of us **hadn’t** asked that one. It’s kind of like the “Seven Wonders of the World,” only from a tragic standpoint. It’s sort of like the “chicken and the egg” question – kind of hard to answer.

The truth is, bad things do happen to good people. But another truth that we typically don’t want to hear much about is that sometimes good people do bad things. It’s really that simple. Say it with me, “Good people do bad things.” Did you have trouble making that sentence come out of your mouth? If you did, it might be happening because you consider yourself a good person! If so, you just placed yourself on the list of people who can, and sometimes do bad things.

This course is designed to help each of us look into the concept of behavioral choices in a manner that allows us to take an honest look at ourselves and be proactive in the areas of choices that define our character. Ministers, counselors, teachers, police officers, nurses, and social workers wake up every day wondering how they have become what they have become, and wondering how to change it.

Granted, there are plenty of continuing education opportunities that will continue to educate people on **“things you cannot do.”** And with the litigious nature of our society, and the era of political correctness in which we live, it seems there are a whole lot more **“can’t do’s”** rather than **“get to’s.”** I think it more important to get inside the person rather than to dissect the behavior. The focus of this course is much more on the **“why”** than the **“what.”**

Honestly, *why* do people whose character is known to be impeccable, make some of the most bone-headed decisions known to mankind? Why do people who are good, compassionate and conscientious people make conscious choices that hurt others?

Don’t think for a minute that the scope of this query will be limited to the professional playing field, because when we get down to it, a person’s character is not molded at work. Even good people find themselves making questionable choices, and their character flaw did not evolve solely in the workplace.

There is almost always a reasonably clear progression that one can re-trace after they have made choice which is, could be, or should be regrettable. It’s worth the time, the effort, and the energy to explore how good people find themselves in bad situations – situations that are considered at the least, ethical dilemmas. And they’re situations that all, without fail, begin with a simple thought.

The Scope Of Ethical Decision Making

Just the word “ethics” causes people to have mental pictures of different things. Media-driven stories based on ethical choices cause many of us to envision back-room deals being banged out by the CEO’s of major corporations, only to result in the fall of the empire, the loss of jobs, and the end of the security and retirement benefits for thousands of unsuspecting professionals. Others of us envision an accounting clerk tidying up her desk at the end of the day, only to brush a company pencil into her satchel before she starts her journey home. Then there is the environment. Giant corporate strategies often include the demolition and destruction of natural resources that are not only aesthetically appealing, but that are critical to life on the planet as we know it. Or on a more personal level, do I recycle? Or not? Someone has been horribly burned in a propane gas explosion. His injuries are such that he will never fully recover, having lost limbs and eyesight during the initial stages of his treatment. He cannot fend for himself in even the simplest of ways. He desires that the doctors stop treating him and allow him to die peacefully. His wishes go unmet, and he undergoes nine months of grueling and tortuous treatment and therapy. Ethical dilemma? Or moral obligation?

You see, there are many types of ethical choices that are as simple as a stolen company pencil, and are as complicated as changing life on the planet for those of us who do not get to choose. It would be impossible to cast a template out over every person, profession, and choice made, so we’re going to start where it all starts – in the thought process of one person. Consider that person to be – well – you!

Where It All Starts

One of my children once had a statement that he conveniently used when he wanted to escape accountability for a poor choice made. When called down for a transgression, he would simply cry as he said, “My brain made me do it! My brain made me do it!” Actually the official transcript would have to have read, “My “bwain” made it do it!” Even as a toddler my son wanted to avoid accountability. He wanted to find someone or something else to take the rap for making what he already knew to be a poor choice. If he could transfer guilt onto something or someone beyond his control, his play would continue and for the rest of that day life would be great.

Most of what we struggle with as adults, as professionals – starts in our make-up as small children. It would be interesting to know how many hours have been consumed debating the “nature vs. nurture” concept of human behavior. Are we who we are because we’re born that way? Or are we who we are because we have been taught to behave a certain way? Regardless of your stance on that issue, the truth is that from birth, our place in the pecking order is at the top! Ask

any baby (if you speak the language). Since few of us speak the language, let me interpret. What any baby would tell us sounds something like this:

*“OK, I am simply amazed that you have not yet understood what the heck is going on here. I’m going to say it one time and one time only – real slowly. Are you listening? OK, here goes. I don’t know why people in this house haven’t yet realized that since I got here, there have been some misplaced priorities. It appears by my astute observations that you all feel there are others in the house that are on occasion, more important than I am. Let me help you to understand, **THAT IS NOT TRUE AND IT NEVER WILL BE!** I have but one means to let you know that I am displeased with the attention others are getting, or to inform you of other uncomfortable situations in which I may find myself. I cry. What you need to know is, if I am crying, you need to be jumping. How high? That remains to be seen, because you haven’t got the jumping part down yet! Let’s take a little test. When I’m wet, what am I going to do? That’s right, I’ll cry. If I have a dirty, messy, smelly diaper, what’s my course of action? Crying. You’re doing well! When I’m cold, want the light turned on, am hungry, or just want your attention, you can better bet, I cry and I’m going to continue crying until you understand your place in this drama! I hear you sometimes say, ‘He’s not crying, he’s just mad.’ Duh! Of course I’m mad! I came into this world, and obviously not a bit too soon! It was warm and safe where I was, and it was certainly cold and the lights were too bright when I arrived. I don’t ever remember being hungry until I got here. Are you taking notes?”*

Outside human intervention, and the example and teaching of those who are in the roles of parents, caretakers, teachers, and such, we would continue on the path of the baby, and would insist that the world meet us at our every need and whim. We have to learn compassion for others, rules and regulations, and the need for boundaries and parameters. I know, you’re noting that you STILL know someone who’s dressed in an adult body that acts just like the pious little toot that was speaking only a moment ago. Obviously they didn’t learn well.

Nonetheless, we have to learn at least that part of getting along with the rest of the world. There are more people here than just me. I need to learn that and get over it. The sooner I learn that truth, the more likely I will develop decision making skills that will be *inclusive* of others, and not based on my own selfish motives.

This is not all to say that people are completely bad when they’re born. That’s an issue each of us must decide for ourselves. This course has neither a political nor a religious agenda. It must however, deal with truth or it is of no value at all. It is literally impossible to deny that the environment during the formative years plays a huge role in how we view the rest of the world, or if we care about it at all.

Word Clarification

There are three terms that seem to be used somewhat synonymously in our society, and again, these are words whose meanings are debated and argued all the time. For the sake of this course however, we think we have a pretty clear and safe idea about the three terms. These terms are values, morals, and ethics.

Values

Definition (as per dictionary.com) - the ideals, customs, institutions, etc., of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard. These values may be positive, as cleanliness, freedom, or education, or negative, as cruelty, crime, or blasphemy.

Let's start with something everyone has. A person's values come from many different sources. Primarily, a person's family helps in the development of someone's values. You will see families go for generation after generation supporting the same political party, attending the same church, expecting the same educational achievements of their children, and so on. Further down the chain of influence is a person's friends, their school, teachers, coaches, and let's not forget, their own free will. But everybody has values. When you place those values under different microscopes, we get different results. Religious values exclude other priorities from being important or acceptable. For instance, a person's political stance that is representative of his or her values may find it acceptable to say unkind things about an opposing candidate or political party. The same person's religious values may state that it is not appropriate to say unkind things about anyone. Therefore the religious microscope would reveal that person to have "bad values" in the arena of political thought. They're still values, nonetheless.

Many people are by nature or nurture, selfish. They do not consider others to be important enough to be considered when making decisions for themselves. Selfishness leads to boorish and unkind behaviors. But it still reveals a person's values. Maybe those values are bad ones, but they're still a person's values. If a person cheats or is inconsiderate of others in order to get what they want, values are being revealed. Stealing reveals a person's values. Their values disregard and disrespect others and their possessions. If another person follows the rules and considers others in how he or she makes decisions, values are being revealed there as well.

Morals

Definition (as per dictionary.com) - Concerned with principles of right and wrong or conforming to standards of behavior and character based on those principles.

Morals are similar to some values and are often use synonymously with values, but are not the same thing at all. Morals are ideas on which we act based on our positive values. All won't agree, but I believe the primary difference is that while there are bad values, there are no bad morals. Morals are primarily held beliefs that push a person's character and behavior toward choices that provide positive benefit for mankind in general. Upholding moral standards will not disregard or disrespect others. Many people who have morals and high moral standards derive this attitude and behavior from a religious background which demands attitudes and behaviors that are considerate and kind where others are concerned. How can there be high moral standards if there are no bad morals? There can be moral standards that are either at a higher level than others, or moral standards that are further developed than others.

For example, let's say you and I both believe that it is our moral obligation to care for widows and orphans. With that in mind, you commit to a monetary sacrifice each month that will be given to a foundation that cares for widows and orphans. I agree with the moral obligation, but instead I commit to giving money to the same organization, whenever I get some extra money. We both have the same moral idea or obligation, but your actions are further developed than mine. You are willing to make the sacrifice right now, while I'm mulling it around, hoping for a windfall. The beliefs that form our morals are similar – but our standards are at different levels right now.

Ethics

Definition (as per dictionary.com) - Motivation based on ideas of right and wrong.

Ethics are somewhat a compilation of a person's value system and moral character. Ethics can be used as a noun or as an adjective, modifying another noun in the sentence. I was talking with my business partner about ethics, and we agreed that there is a formula for ethics, but it's not one that can be written out and taught. The ingredients that lead to ethics are dynamic and changing things like values, virtues, morals, ideologies, et al. But at any one time the formula can include one or several of the various choices available.

One thing that can typically be agreed upon however is that the word "integrity" comes to mind when ethics are on the table.

Many years ago I was seeing an eight year old boy in counseling, and gave him an assignment. I had asked him if he knew what integrity meant. He said he thought so, but wasn't quite sure. I suggested that he go home and research

integrity. Upon his findings, I wanted him to bring back to me a real life scenario that defined integrity in one way or another. When he returned the next week, I asked him of his findings, and he said this, based on a real event that had recently occurred:

“I was walking to a friend’s house the other day and when I walked by the storm drain, I looked in it. I always do that because stuff floats in it all the time, and sometimes I can get it out and play with it. I looked in the drain, and on a ledge just below the grate, I saw something sitting there that looked like a wallet. I was able to reach down far enough to grab it, and when I pulled it out, it WAS a wallet. I opened it up, and there was a man’s driver’s license in it, and some credit cards. I looked in the back part of it, and there was more than \$100 in cash too. I looked all around me to see if anyone was looking, and when I realized I was alone, I put the wallet in my pocket. After about an hour at my friend’s house, I started feeling guilty about having someone else’s money, so I went home and showed the wallet to my parents. We found the man’s phone number by the address on his driver’s license, and he was very grateful that we called. He lived a few blocks away, and we never figured out how his wallet, full of money, dry as a bone, ended up in the storm drain. Anyway he came by later that day and took the wallet. He thanked me and before he left, he said, ‘You must be a young man with a great deal of integrity. Thank you for making the right choice.’ He gave me \$20 for being honest. I wanted to say that I had thought about not being honest, but I didn’t. If there had been someone there when I found the wallet, I’d have never thought about keeping it. Anyway, here’s my definition of integrity. Integrity is what you show when you make the same decision when nobody is watching, that you would make if there was someone watching.”

I never cease to be amazed how much I learn from the people I have the privilege of counseling. This young man’s ethical guidelines were being formed on the spot. The combination of his moral belief that stealing was wrong, and the value judgment that someone else would suffer for his choice, formed his ethical choice to return the wallet and the money. Here’s the key though. Even with what appears to be outstanding training from his parents and others, **he still thought about stealing the money.** He didn’t, but he thought about it, and fantasized about what he might do with more than \$100. The boy was faced with an ethical dilemma, and came out smelling like a rose. If not for the knowledge that he considered stealing the money, one would think him perfect. Now though, with that knowledge . . .

. . . we know he is just like us.

Ethical Dilemmas

In order to best determine where ethical failures may be taking place, it is important to identify two basic types of those failures. Not all ethical dilemmas are the same. Some are big, while others are little. Some are important, while others seem insignificant. The following information is derived from ideas supported by corporate ethics guru Laura Nash in her 1990 Best Seller, Good Intentions Aside; A Manager's Guide To Resolving Ethical Problems.

“There is not a manager or human being alive who has not offered one of the following excuses for failure to act with integrity: ‘Nobody’s getting hurt.’ ‘Everybody does it.’ ‘That’s just the way things are done.’ ‘Everybody understands what’s really going on.’ ‘I can’t afford to do otherwise.’ ‘Nobody cares about this anyway.’ ‘That’s not really an ethical issue.’ Whenever such rationalizations are voiced, it’s time to take a second look at your behavior or that of your company. Nine times out of ten you are in a Type B situation. Problems in Business Ethics – Type A (The Acute Dilemma): Situations where you do not know what is the right or wrong thing to do. Type B (The Acute Rationalization): Situations where you know what is right, but fail to do it.” (Nash, Good Intentions Aside, p, 126-7).

Nash notes in the book that top level executives tend to be saddled with more Type A – Acute Dilemmas, while middle and lower level professionals have almost all Type – B issues, - Acute Rationalizations. Needless to say, we all find ourselves at one time or another, dealing with either or both types of dilemmas.

Type A – The Acute Dilemma

Simply put, the Acute Dilemma can be described as an “ethical uncertainty.” One can genuinely find him or herself in a situation where *the right answer is not right there*. There are certainly enough situations in life where doing the right thing is what might be considered “a gray area.” Being faced with these types of decisions can be emotionally and mentally grueling. These decisions can cause us to doubt what we have believed all our lives, or can even cause us to change perceptions or values based on the situation.

Think of some Acute Dilemmas in your personal or professional life. Was it harder or easier than you thought it would be?

Type B – The Acute Rationalization

Different from the Acute Dilemma, the Acute Rationalization has nothing to do with uncertainty or confusion. There is nothing “gray” about the Acute Rationalization. These decisions are “black and white,” not hard to see at all. These decisions occur when one is not making a judgment about something that is vague or hard to understand. This dilemma is described as “ethical failure.”

These are areas where individuals simply choose to do the wrong thing. The reasoning is not even important to the result. The bottom line is, we sometimes choose to do the wrong thing – consciously. We may do some rationalizing, seducing ourselves into believing that these choices are even issues – but that is about us living with ourselves. We know that without justifying our actions, we will feel guilty and struggle with ourselves.

Can you think of specific examples of Acute Rationalizations in your profession or personal life? Was it easier or harder than coming up with Acute Dilemmas?

*Every evil thing ever done in the world began as a thought in the mind.
Every wonderful, sincere act of goodness and virtue ever committed in the world
also began as a thought in the mind.*

Invisible Change

How often when we make judgments about people's choices, do we contemplate these types of questions?

Do you think that people who make unethical choices are bad apples?

and

Whoever those people are, have they always been this way?

If we apply those same thoughts to our own thoughts, attitudes, and ultimately our own behaviors, are the answers the same?

For most of us, when we note that there is either a struggle in our decision-making, or that it has just changed "with no warning," it's time to put on our mental and emotional brakes. We have to discover what is happening, or has already happened unbeknownst to us. What we will find is that somewhere along the line there was a thought. It was a single, simple, seemingly harmless thought – maybe even somewhat of a fantasy. But that thought, when compared to the truth that we know about right vs. wrong, would prove to be on the side of wrong if observed objectively. Most of us, if honest, will answer that "the thought" involved the rationalization that nobody would ever know, therefore how harmful could it be? We might have even struggled about the thought before making a decision that appeared on the surface to be benign. If we followed through on that decision though, we may have found that it was a short journey from benign behaviors to very, very toxic choices that can change relationships, careers, and lives. Note the progression from ethical thinking to unethical behavior.

Roger has always lived by and acted on the philosophy that he should never treat anyone differently than he would like to be treated. He is typically irritated by others who disrespect him and his time by not keeping appointments and social engagements. He has even at times, while in meetings or appointments, asked to be excused for a moment so he can alert others that he is going to be late or be unable to fulfill his end of a professional or social obligation. One day Roger is engaged in a personal lunch with some friends, and is having such a good time he forgets that he had an appointment with a potential client at 1:30. It is now 1:20 and he knows that first; he is more than a half hour from being able to be at the appointed meeting place. Second; there is a thought. The thought states that he has had a rough week and deserves the opportunity to relax and kick back with his friends. Besides that, it's Friday and it might just be that the rest of the afternoon can be dedicated to cutting up with those friends, and enjoying a few drinks. Rather than call the client and arrange to either meet late, or reschedule the meeting, Roger steps away from his friends, calls his receptionist and asks her to lie to the client for him. "Tell him that my previous meeting has run long and I will be unable to keep my appointment today," he said. "Tell him I'll call him back Monday to reschedule." He hangs up, content that he has defused the situation, and goes back to his friends.

At least for a time, Roger may never stop to think about his personal value that states that others should be treated as he would like to be treated. There are likely few of us that cannot identify with the previous scenario, either identically or with a few different details. In no specific order of priority here are at least SOME of the inherent problems with "the thought."

Because Of "The Thought"

- Roger has disrespected a person with whom he has obligated his time
- Roger has potentially damaged a professional opportunity, and maybe the reputation of his business
- Roger has lied about his own personal and professional circumstances
- Roger has asked his receptionist to lie for him, and now she is faced with an ethical dilemma of her own
- If he does not get caught in his lie, Roger is much more likely to repeat the same behavior again, with other people and other obligations

This may be a good time to stop and note that there are no eyes reading this material that are not connected to the same head, brain, and body that has had the same thought. Almost all of those eyes, heads, brains, and bodies have made a similar if not identical decision. Oh, and if that decision or one like it has been made once, it has probably been made on multiple occasions. This situation is akin to calling in sick when one is capable of working, taking personal time in lieu specified sick time, being unprepared for professional appointments,

and canceling because the kids are sick, I am sick, my dog is sick, my grandmother died again, my car broke down, the building was flooded, or there was a quick and completely unexpected earthquake.

It is SO easy to fall into the trap that seems to kick-start an awkward and negative spiral toward unethical decision making. Can you see in Roger's behavior the tendency we discussed earlier about escaping accountability? He blames anything and everything but himself for the missed appointment. He doesn't believe any of it for a second, but he banks on the premise that someone else will. Roger's decision was simply selfish. Everyone looks at their watch realizing they have overstayed, overindulged, or overdone. The correct choice would have been for Roger to personally call the client, explain that he had inadvertently stayed longer than expected at his previous engagement, and asked the client what his choice would be for meeting later or even rescheduling. It would have required an element of humility and transparency that at this time in Roger's life, falls behind selfishness and dishonesty on his list of personal and professional priorities.

OUCH!

Loss of Alignment

If you've ever owned a car, truck, or SUV, you have probably experienced with that vehicle, alignment problems. I'm not sure how to technically explain misalignment on a car, but the end result is, the car doesn't drive in a straight line when it is supposed to. Because of uneven wear on the tires, or other adjustments that need repair, the car pulls to one side or the other when it is supposed to be going straight. Loss of alignment doesn't typically make the vehicle "undriveable," but it makes keeping it on the road a real struggle at times. When we get misaligned personally, we don't usually stop functioning, but the level of energy required to keep things on an even keel changes, requiring more of us than ever before.

Personal loss of alignment occurs when, for whatever reason, we begin to pursue the wrong end. This process, as we have noted, begins innocently enough. In pursuing what seems at the moment to be a justifiable end, we make a trade-off of some kind. We know it is wrong, but we rationalize our choice. We use the *wrong end* to justify our *selfish means*. Look at the example! Roger made a potentially costly choice and asked others to take part in his dishonesty based on his desire to stay awhile longer at lunch with his buddies. Would you recommend this behavior for your friends? Colleagues? Employees? Your own children?

Loss of Alignment can be a serious maintenance issue in the personal and professional life of an individual. If our core values and morals are being violated by our own choices, as time passes something inside begins to wither. We lose

the passion and vitality from which we normally do what we do, and have to rely on sheer discipline to get things done. Since we know (maybe subconsciously) that we are operating out of a damaged value system, the energy we typically invest in our work and life is not naturally replenished, and the joy in what we do is significantly diminished, if not destroyed. We might be experiencing a slow ethical or professional death.

A major challenge for everyone today regardless of their profession is to have the ability to create an environment of trust, fairness, and openness – a place where our differences are valued and utilized. Whether my position or title reflects leadership in the organization or not, I must choose to lead by example, set high goals, and always remember that “doing the right thing” has **huge** positive implications. Conversely, “doing the wrong thing” has **huge** negative consequences. If not immediately, poor ethical choices will catch up to us eventually. The ethical journey begins with me, and may end with you.

Personal And Professional Risk

We are bombarded with corporate and personal theories that state, “Be on the cutting edge!” “Be a risk-taker!” “You can’t stay ahead of the pack without engaging in risks!” This is true, but how does one determine which risks are worthy of consideration and which are not?

Here is a theory that may seem backward compared to most social and corporate theories, but give it a chance:

If in fact it is imperative that forward progression in my personal and professional life involves taking risks, how then do I determine if a risk is worthy of my efforts? Most would consider that I look at the possible reward of the risk and ask myself the questions, “Is this what I really want? Am I willing to sacrifice for what I want?” Those questions are usually followed with the statement, “If I want this for my personal or my professional life, and am willing to make the sacrifice, I should go for it!”

*There is in fact another, albeit more conservative manner of determining when risk is appropriate or not. Rather than considering the reward if the risk or gamble pays off, why not consider the consequences? I should contemplate what the potential consequences are if the risk **does not** pay off. Quite simply, if I cannot live with these consequences, this is likely a risk in which I should not engage.*

That theory likely sounds backward compared to most corporate-speak. But if you give it some thought, you will probably see the logic in it. We have all been devastated because a risk didn’t pay off. Many times we wish we had never engaged in whatever the risk may have been. If we had thought that these

consequences were possible before we took the risk, would we have made the same choices? More often than not, we would answer “no.”

Conversely there are those who look at any consequences as too much risk, and never step out into any discovery of any kind. From a professional standpoint, whether or not they make it will be determined by the market they serve. For the most part, refusing to take risks points to eventual professional death.

The Truth About Trees

What is inside a tree flows through the tree, and *is* the internal makeup of that tree. No matter what the outside of the tree may look like now, the interior of the tree will eventually be exposed to the condition of its exterior. Put simply, damage to the exterior will eventually affect the interior. Damage to the soil in which the tree grows may not show on the tree’s exterior right now, but eventually it will show both on the inside and the outside. The soil in which our personal roots are growing is the soul from which we get our nourishment – our SAP – if you will. The steady flow into our lives of thoughts, images, perceptions, and emotions is the sap of our lives. This flow is central to, and represented by, our behaviors.

Here’s the problem. If some or all of my sap – my thoughts, images, perceptions, and consequently my emotions – is not made up of positive values and moral-driven choices, the results will show in my behavior. If all these images and thoughts are perceived as truth, but are actually distorted, much of who I am may not be based on a positive reality. Here’s a simple but common example:

I feed sap to my little trees – my children. That sap consists of my physical presence and attention, and my emotional investment in them. What if that sap consists mostly of my responses to their grades, their hair, body piercings, the condition of their room, and their friends? It’s not that any of these issues are not important, but what if that constitutes my entire relationship with my kids? Is it any wonder that our kids are becoming cynical, angry, hopeless, co-dependant people?

**The words that others have spoken to us, whether true or not,
Become the truest thing that we know about ourselves.**

There is no difference when it comes to our personal lives and the decisions we choose to make. In the above example, we are not providing rich, nutritious soil for our little trees. Not surprisingly, we are getting far too few healthy young trees these days! It’s because that which feeds them is not healthy either.

You may have heard the old Indian story that says:

Inside every man and woman lives the struggle between right and wrong. It is much like two dogs that are warring against one another for supremacy. Both are strong in their desire to win. Their teeth are sharp, their senses in tune, and their eyes intense. The battle will be fierce inside of me. I am very familiar with each of these dogs. They are both very capable opponents. There is, however, a truth that allows me to know, inside my heart, before the battle is over, which dog will win. Which dog will win the battle? The one I feed the most.

What am I storing in my mind?
What is pulsing through my "tree?"
Into what kind of soil are MY roots growing?
Am I just managing my behavior moment by moment?
Or am I committed to consistently being what I believe I should be?

Steps in Ethical Decision Making

There are literally hundreds of models of ethical decision making, and most of them contain the same ideas worded differently. Most models of ethical decision making are the ethical version of the scientific method. Below are some suggestions that may help an individual make better ethical choices in personal and professional pursuits.

- *Identify The Problem Or Dilemma*

Gather as much information as possible that sheds light on your situation. Clarify whether your conflict is ethical, legal, moral, or a combination of personal and social issues. Remember that such dilemmas can be very complex, so it is useful to look at the problem from many perspectives and avoid simplistic solutions. (Some things are however, very simple and require simple solutions).

- *Identify The Potential Issues Involved*

After your information is collected, list and describe critical issues and discard irrelevant ones. Evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and welfare of all those who are affected by the situation. Part of the process of making ethical decisions involves identifying competing moral or value principles. Good reasons can often be presented to support various sides of a given issue. Different ethical principles may sometimes imply contradictory courses of action.

- *Review The Relevant Ethical Guidelines*

Ask whether the guidelines, standards, or principles of your profession offer a possible solution to the problem. Consider whether your own values and morals are consistent with or in conflict with relevant guidelines. If you are in disagreement with a guideline, do you have a rationale or platform to support your position?

- *Obtain Consultation*

At this point it is generally helpful to consult with a colleague or other trusted individuals to obtain a different perspective on the problem. Because of your involvement in the situation you may have trouble seeing the proverbial forest for the trees. Consultation can help you think about information or circumstances that you may have overlooked. In making ethical decisions you must justify a direct course of action based on sound reasoning, professional guidelines, and the law. Consultation with others provides an opportunity to test your justifications.

- *Consider Possible And Probable Causes Of Action*

Brainstorming is useful at this stage of ethical decision making. By listing a wide variety of courses of action you may come up with a possibility that is unorthodox, yet useful. Don't forget that one alternative may be that no action is required. In this process of thinking about so many possibilities for action, it is again helpful to discuss options with trusted friends or colleagues.

- *Consider The Consequences For Various Decisions*

Think about the possible consequences for each course of action. Consider yourself, your professional affiliations, and other individuals involved.

- *Decide On What Appears To Be The Best Course of Action*

In making what you consider to be the best decision, consider carefully the information you have received from various sources. The more obvious the dilemma (Acute Dilemma), the clearer the course of action. The more subtle the dilemma (Acute Rationalization), the more difficult the decision may be.

Precautions

- Remember that your focus must stay on your own behavior and not on that of others.
- Remember that you will always find *cracks* in your own ethical positions.
- Remember that when you find cracks, it is always best that you consider the changes that should be made.
- Remember that the line between right and wrong is often fuzzy – that the answers are not always clear-cut.
- Remember that memorizing facts will not lead you toward making ethical decisions. Clarification of your personal values will.

Summary

When it comes to determining if I make ethical decisions, it is imperative that I am in touch with my personal as well as my professional self. Knowing all the rules doesn't mean anything by itself. If I don't know what motivates me, what needs I have (both met and unmet), and what my priorities are, I am far more susceptible to ethical failure. Is there any doubt then that small or seemingly insignificant ethical failures will lead to larger, more significant ones?

To be the most effective professional and the best person I can be, I must know my own needs and tendencies, be honest with myself about them, and identify the "thoughts" in my mind that are born because of what's inside me. If I have accurately identified those thoughts, I can intercept and intervene before I act on them. Repeating this process may indeed change what I think, feel, and ultimately believe.

We have all grown up with value and moral systems that we think are "the truth." As we get older and wiser these systems and issues are often challenged, and we make conscious change in what we believe. Those changes don't often happen easily though, and usually involve having to endure consequences for bad choices, or not enough reward for the ones we thought to be best. Staying on top of our "truth" is something that most of us do not do naturally. Making this a priority may be the key to keeping me ethically pure. Avoiding or ignoring my "truths" may allow those truths to be lost in lieu of more self-serving pursuits.

In life, open doors will get stepped through. Having stepped through them, we may be grateful that we did, or we may regret that we did. Knowing what our truths actually are and having behaviors that match up with those truths will help us know which doors are worthy of our presence.

Your personal ethical framework did not just "happen." You built it. Good or bad, you created it out of the truths you brought with you from childhood and the ones you have developed as an adult person and professional. If your current truths

are not consistent with what you thought they were, or what you think they should be, take the initiative to make the changes necessary to protect yourself and others with truly ethical thinking and behavior.

Word of Thanks

I'd like to thank my friend David Terry who introduced me to the idea of "It Was Just A Thought." David is a fine man who embodies for me not only the idea, but provides a fantastic example of a man being "transparent." David is a tremendous teacher, speaker, and recently released his first book, The Original Sanctuary. See information about the book, co-authored with Marc Owings at www.theoriginalsanctuary.com.

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