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A Time for Ethics: Decision-Making for Peer Leaders

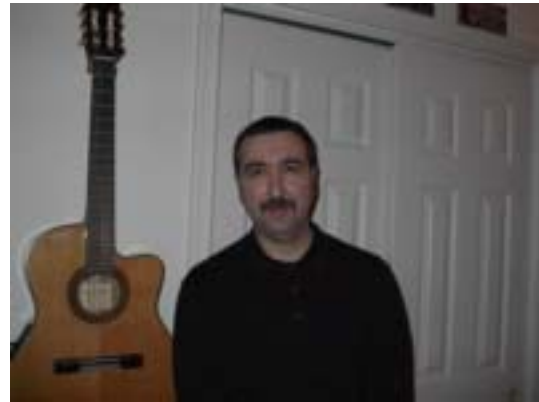
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The concept of ethics has hit the popular press in the past few years with amazing regularity. Ethics in the news has captured the attention of North Americans with corporate wrongdoing, controversy over medical research involving cloning and stem cell research, assisted suicide and other individual ethical dilemmas. This article describes the principles upon which ethics are grounded and provides insight into resolving ethical dilemmas. The purpose of this article is to provide a practical rationale for peer programs to include an ethical code within their delivery standards.

Ethics Defined

Ethics is the systematic study of how we ought to act toward others and ourselves. Ethics is a code of conduct representing ideal behavior for a group of individuals. Ethics is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation. Ethics can be considered a theory or system of moral values. Ethics is about the way things ought to be.

Ethics is sometimes confused with morality or character. These three concepts are closely interrelated. Generally, morality is a system of rules that modifies our behavior in social



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situations. It's about the doing of good instead of harm, and it sets some standard of virtuous conduct. Character involves: trustworthiness, respect, personal responsibility, fairness and being a caring human being. These character traits represent our ethical values. These ethical values guide our choices and ultimate decisions on a daily basis.

Ethics, therefore, is a body of principles or standards of human conduct that govern the behavior of individuals and groups. A code of ethics or a system of standards has become a defining characteristic of a professional

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organization. This code or system prescribes acceptable behaviors for the individuals of that specific organization or profession. Do you know what your ethical code or system of standards is in your organization?

Major Ethical Principles

The following principles have been commonly accepted as crucial in the understanding and solving of ethical dilemmas: (1) the principle of nonmaleficence; (2) the principle of beneficence; (3) the principle of justice; (4) the principle of fidelity; and (5) the principle of self respect.

The Principle of Nonmaleficence

This principle promotes the concept of not causing harm to others. Often explained as "above all do no harm", this principle is considered by some to be the most critical of all the principles. Nonmaleficence reflects both the idea of not inflicting intentional harm, and not engaging in actions that risk harming others. Ask yourself: Did I do more good than harm today? Or did I try to? Consider the short term and long-term ramifications of your actions.

The Principle of Beneficence

This principle focuses on the commitment to promoting the individual's well being. The principle of beneficence means acting in the best interests of the individual. Ask yourself: Did I treat people with dignity and respect today? All human beings should be treated with dignity simply because they are human. Individuals have rights, especially the right to be treated as free and equal human beings, not as things to be manipulated or controlled.

The Principle of Justice

This principle focuses on the fair and impartial treatment of all individuals. The principle of justice requires being just and fair to all individuals and respecting their human rights and dignity. It directs attention to considering conscientiously any legal requirements and obligations, and remaining alert to potential conflicts between legal and ethical obligations. Ask yourself: Was I fair and just today? Did I treat each person the same unless there was some relevant moral reason to treat him or her differently? Justice requires that we be fair in the way we distribute benefits and burdens. Who did I benefit and whom did I burden? How did I decide?

The Principle of Fidelity

This principle involves the notions of loyalty, faithfulness, and honoring commitments. Being trustworthy is regarded as fundamental to understanding and resolving ethical issues. Ask yourself: Did I cross a line today? Or was I, at least some of the time, a person who showed integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, compassion, or any other virtues?

The Principle of Self Respect

This principle fosters an appreciation for self-knowledge, personal self respect and dignity. The question to ask yourself is: Did I practice any virtues today? Virtues can be considered our habits from the heart. These are the ultimate principle of self respect and caring for others.

Test for an Ethical Situation

There are two basic methods to determine an ethical dilemma:

- The test of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?)
- The test of universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?)

Resolving an Ethical Dilemma

The principles of ethical reasoning are useful tools for sorting out the good and bad components within complex human interactions. For this reason the study of ethics has been the focus of intellectual thought since the early Greek philosophers.

If you have established that you are indeed experiencing an ethical dilemma, here's a sure shot way to process through your situation:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Apply your organizations code of ethics (if you have one).
3. Determine the nature and depth of your dilemma.
4. Generate possible courses of action.
5. Consider the potential consequences of all options, choose a course of action based on this analysis.
6. Evaluate the selected course of action.
7. Implement the course of action.

Here are five questions to ask yourself when attempting to resolve an ethical dilemma:

- What benefit and potential harm will each course of action produce?
- Which alternative will lead to the best overall consequence?

- What human and moral rights do the affected parties have, and which course of action best respects those rights?
- Which course of action treats everyone as an equal, except where there is a morally justifiable reason not to, and does not show favoritism or discrimination?
- Which course of action advances the common good?

Being "ethical" requires not only a personal value base but also a thorough understanding of the ethical code of your organization. When situations challenge either one's personal ethical base or the ethical code of your organization, it pays to be ready! Ethical dilemmas happen! Would you know what to do should one arise?

Further References

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