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## BLOG

### ETHICAL DECISION MAKING AND THE IT PROFESSIONAL

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**By: Lou Berzai, CCP/CSP**

*Editor's Note: This is the second of a series of articles on Ethics from 1991 AITP President and faculty member of the University of Notre Dame, Lou Berzai, CSP, CCP. The first article is: How Ethical Theories Apply to IT Professionals. This article was a paper from some theories discussion in Lou's ethics classes.*



*Here are the other two articles:*

- *How Ethical Theories Apply to IT Professionals*  
(<http://192.168.0.142/blog/aitp-blog/2017/06/27/how-ethical-theories-apply-to-it-professionals>)
- *Ethical Problems in Computing* (<http://192.168.0.142/blog/aitp-blog/2017/07/04/ethical-problems-in-computing>)

Using the concept of ethical theory as a springboard, one may make informed ethical decisions. **Ethical decision making is a very important part of the business environment because often a situation may come along that questions one's morals.** Ethical decision making deals with preferences, utilities, costs, benefits, goals, and objectives. One must take all of these into account in order to define the problem and determined the desired end result. Basically, it is "the process of identifying a problem, generating alternatives, and choosing among them so that the alternatives selected maximized the most important ethical values while also achieving the intended goal". (Guy 157)

In the business world, there are three main levels that required ethical decision-making: individual, corporate, and national. Each area involves different methods of decision-making, yet all three must determine rules of conduct as well as who will be affected and how much weight to assign to their interests. This is not an easy task and can often be disregarded or used improperly. **Ethical decision making is not meant to rationalized improper behavior.** In order to ensure that ethical decision-making is implemented properly, one must determine how to make ethical decisions.

Complex ethical decisions have four basic characteristics:

- Two or more values are affected by the decision.
- A comparison between values is inevitable, such than a greater return to one can be obtained only at a loss to the other.
- Uncertainty prevails, meaning that not everything is known about the situation and anticipated consequences cannot be predicted with certainty.
- The power to make the decision is dispersed over a multitude of individual actors and/or organizational units. (Guy 35)

**Such decisions are faced in the business world on a daily basis and quite obviously are not easy tasks to handle.** In order to tackle such decisions, one must consider the specific values that guide decision-making, elucidated by Mary Guy in her book *Ethical Decision Making in Everyday Work Situations*.

She provides the acronym CHAPELFIRZ to recall these values easily. CHAPELFIRZ stands for Caring, Honesty, Accountability, Promise keeping, pursuit of Excellence, Loyalty, Fairness, Integrity, Respect for others, and responsible citizenship. (Guy 14)

- **Caring** means that individuals should be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to an end.
- **Honesty** involves truthfulness and not deceiving others.
- **Accountability** refers to accepting the consequences of one's actions and accepting responsibility for all decisions.
- **Promise keeping** means adhering to one's commitments.
- **Pursuit of excellence** means that one must strive to be as good as he/she can be.
- **Loyalty** entails that one must be faithful to all those with whom one deals.
- **Fairness** involves open-mindedness and a willingness to admit error.
- **Integrity** calls one to use independent judgment, avoid conflicts of interest, and resist economic pressure.
- **Respect for others** means that one should recognize each other's rights and respect human dignity.
- **Responsible citizenship** means that one's actions should be in accordance with societal values.

These values provide a strong basis for making ethical decisions. Guy asserts that "**when put into practice, these values generate widely recognized virtues that provide benchmarks for ethical decision making**". (Guy 17)

Based on these values, Guy generates **principles and rules for ethical decision-making**. Four principles are:

- Treat all individuals with fairness
- Do to others as you would have them do to you

- Act in such a way that you will produce the maximum good
- Act in such a way as to work towards general human and social success (Guy17-18)

**From these principles, five rules for ethical decision-making can be ascertained.**

They are as follows:

- Consider the well-being of others
- Think as a member of the community
- Obey the law but do not depend solely upon it
- Ask, what sort of person would do such a thing
- Respect the customs of others, but do not compromise your own ethics (Guy 18-19)

**These principles and rules can be used in any sort of situation but are very applicable to the business world, primarily the area of computer technology.** When facing computer dilemmas one should always consider other people involved, the morality of a situation, not just the legality of it, and also one's own integrity. One should always make both a rational and ethical decision. It is important that one not disregard ethics in favor of pure rationality because they are two distinct areas, both of which involve different decision-making processes.

**To make a rational decision, Guy asserts that six steps must be followed:**

- Define the problem
- Identify the goal to be achieved
- List all possible solutions to the problem
- Evaluate each alternative to determine which one best meets the requirements of the situation
- Identify the one course of action that is most likely to produce the desired consequences within the constraints of the situation
- Make a commitment to the choice and implement it (Guy 28-30)

Such a process is a good method for achieving rational decisions. It allows one to think reasonably about the problem and come to the proper consensus about how to handle it. Yet at the same time, it does not take into account any of the ethical theories discussed or the idea of ethical decision-making.

In response to this, Guy further offers **seven guidelines for making ethical decisions**, which are similar to those for rational decisions but add a different dimension because they take morality into account. These guidelines are as follows:

- Define the problem
- Acknowledge the context in which the problem arose in order to identify all stakeholders involved
- Identify the values that are at stake
- Select the values that must be maximized
- Choose the alternative that maximizes the essential values and minimizes as few as possible
- Assure that the consequences of the decision will be ethical in regard to both its short-term and its long-term consequences
- Implement the decision. (Guy 165)

This method takes into account the values that are important for ethical actions. It is important that these ethical decision making guidelines be used in the business world, not just the steps for making rational decisions, in order to ensure that a certain degree of morality be present.

One should be able to assess moral principles and probable consequences in ethical dilemmas. **Such skills become intrinsically important in such areas as computer crime, privacy, and the power of professionals.** Such problematic areas can cause much damage to a company's moral and its relationships with clients and other companies. Thus, the need for ethical decision-making in the business world is of utmost importance.

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