Ethical Decision-Making

Sample Course Syllabus

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Every day, we are confronted with small ethical decisions — and most of us accept that sometimes we will do the right thing, and other times we will have “harmless” lapses.

We have all asked ourselves, “What’s the harm?” when we make small ethical compromises for “good” reasons: We lie to a customer because our boss asks us to. We exaggerate our accomplishments on our résumé to get an interview. We inflate our sales numbers to impress a potential client. We become comfortable with these transgressions. Temptation blindsides us. And we make snap decisions we later regret.

Minor ethical lapses may seem harmless, but they instill in us a hard-to-break habit of distorted thinking. We make up the rules as we go. We lose control of our decisions, fall victim to the temptations and pressures of our situations, taint our characters, and sour business and personal relationships.

Through class discussions and hands-on exercises, this course helps participants develop practical tools to respond skillfully to life’s inevitable ethical challenges. Not only can we make skillful decisions, we can also acquire new habits that allow us to live lives of meaning and integrity.

Raising Ethical Sensitivity
We raise awareness to ethical temptation and compromise. We examine the most common ethical temptations: to lie, deceive, steal, or harm. The goal is to become aware of these temptations and the unintended consequences of transgressions.

Mastering Ethical Distinctions
We discuss how to use ethical logic and principles to foster clear thinking. We identify the distinctions necessary to reason ethically, including prudential, legal, and ethical dimensions of an action; positive and negative ethics; and action-based and consequence-based schools of thought. The goal is to become thoughtful about ethical reasoning.

Learning from History: The Nazi Era
We discuss situations from the Nazi era to understand how people from an economically, scientifically, and culturally advanced country could commit terrible acts, and what it tells us about what may happen in other situations.

Ethical Theories
We identify the ethical principles we have derived, consciously or unconsciously, from religion, biology, upbringing, culture, and philosophy. We discuss the gaps where our existing principles give inadequate guidance. The goal is to become mindful of our inner voice.
Personal Ethics
We explore personal ethical challenges, such as truth-telling, secrets, suicide, promises, and commitments. We discuss how to seek the whole truth of our behavior, reframe situations to focus on relationships, and use the “loved one” test. The goal is to use transformative thinking in our life.

Professional Ethics
We discuss the difference between personal and professional ethics, lawyers and politicians, and laws requiring professionals to disclose ethics.

Organizational Ethics
We explore ethics in an organizational setting. We examine various organizations’ codes of ethics and discuss issues such as finding an ethical employer, addressing customs in other countries that you might find unethical, and paying employees to take risks.

Business Ethics in Practice
We discuss how ethical ideas can be applied in business, in dealing with employees, customers, investors, and vendors.

Areas of Ethical Concern
We practice applying the concepts from the course to other areas of ethical concern, such as acquiring body organs, surrogate motherhood, and robotics.