

Finding a blueprint for making sound ethical decisions

Experts in the field of moral psychology have made some very interesting observations about how our minds work when we evaluate questions of right and wrong.

In an article titled “The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology,” published in *Science* in May 2007, Jonathan Haidt explains that whether we like it or not, our brains are “always and automatically” evaluating everything we perceive and that “higher-level thinking” is “preceded, permeated and influenced” by simple feelings of good and bad, like and dislike.

According to Haidt, we all engage in such processes of moral intuition “without any awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence or inferring a conclusion.” Such mental processes are evident in the automatic, intuitive judgments we make when we hear statements like “He helped the injured child get medical attention” and “He slapped his helpless mother in the face.”

We are, of course, also capable of “moral reasoning.” But Haidt explains that this controlled and “cooler” process evolved much later in our ancestors and generally “can occur only after the first automatic process has run, and it is often influenced by the initial moral intuition.” Moreover, “people generally begin reasoning by setting out to confirm their initial hypothesis.”

Interestingly, research into the ethical decision-making capacity of individuals who have lost their “moral intuition” shows how essential this faculty is to making sound moral decisions. According to Haidt, those who have lost this cognitive ability have an “explicit knowledge of right and wrong” but show massive “emotional deficits” that cripple their judgment and decision making.

As important as a healthy moral intuition is to making a sound decision, it is frequently advisable to engage our weaker moral reasoning skills to double-check whether our initial “gut instincts” are right. We can perform such an evaluation either on our own or with a group.

Flying solo



BUSINESS ETHICS

Jim Nortz

When you think through a difficult ethical question on your own, it’s important that you avoid the pitfall of merely searching for a justification for a decision you’ve already made. Engage in an open-minded deliberative process instead. In so doing, you might consider asking and answering these six questions:

1. What are the facts? A clear-eyed understanding of what is known and what is unknown is an essential prerequisite to any sound decision. Although we are frequently called upon to make important decisions in circumstances where we do not have all the information we’d like, it is important to “get curious” and gather as much relevant information as you reasonably can.

2. What are my obligations in this circumstance? Business leaders have many obligations, but generally those responsibilities fall into one of five major categories: value creation for the business, human dignity, lawfulness, truthfulness and responsible stewardship of the natural environment. Taking into account one’s obligations is fundamental to discerning an ethical course of action.

3. What, if any, obligations are in conflict with one another? Ethical obligations often conflict, such as a business professional’s obligations to maximize profits and to invest in costly systems to protect worker safety. An express recognition of where these conflicts lie is vital to finding a principled balance between obligations.

4. What are the most reasonable options available to me? Identification of reasonable options allows the decision maker to rationally compare their respective advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes the best decision is one we might never have considered without a deliberate search for alternatives. We should always

be sure to consider at least one or two options in addition to the one selected by our moral intuition.

5. What are the possible and likely consequences of each of these options? Real-world consequences must be taken into account in making real-world decisions. Take the time to “run the movie” forward in your head and carefully think through what the likely outcome of each option might be.

6. Taking into account the facts, my obligations, the most reasonable options and their likely consequences, which option is fairest in the circumstances? To be “fair,” a decision must be logical, objective and unbiased, consistent with past and likely future decisions and defensible while avoiding undue harm to people, property and the environment. It must also strike a principled balance between competing moral obligations.

Working with a group

As important as it is to use a systematic process like the one above for moral reasoning, it is rare in business that we make really important decisions on our own. Instead, we routinely gather in groups and work through difficult problems together to take advantage of the fact that “two heads are better than one.” However, there are two things you might consider next time you either lead or participate in a group decision-making exercise.

First, just as when you are making an ethical judgment on your own, it is vital that the members of the group check their individual and collective “moral intuition” through a sound deliberative process such as the one outlined above. Moral philosophers disagree about many things, but they agree that the definition of a good decision is one that can be defended by sound reasons. Always remember that when someone in the group makes the bald assertion that “I think this is the right thing to do,” this is evidence of moral intuition, not moral reasoning.

Second, when making group decisions, be acutely aware of social dynamics that can result in “groupthink,” which may produce demonstrably boneheaded and

sometimes catastrophic decisions. The Challenger space shuttle disaster is one of many famous examples of the dangers of groupthink.

One strategy you might want to consider to avoid the hazards of groupthink is to ask all members of the team to take the time to answer the six questions above before any meeting. Another is to remember that group consensus should never be the

highest priority if your aim is to make the right call.

Regardless of whether you are making an important ethical decision on your own or with a group, don't just cross your fingers and hope that your moral intuition will always be correct. Instead, take the time to find a more reliable blueprint for sound ethical decision making that will work for you and your team.

Jim Nortz is compliance director at Bausch & Lomb Inc. and is a member of the Rochester Area Business Ethics Foundation. The opinions expressed in this article are Nortz's alone and may not reflect those of Bausch & Lomb or the RABEF. For more information about the RABEF, visit www.rochesterbusinessethics.com. Nortz can be reached at (585) 260-8960 or james.a.nortz@bausch.com.