

EXPLORING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Patricia S. Pinnell, M.A.
Extension Agent
Preston County

Shirley C. Eagan, Ed.D.
Extension Specialist
Volunteer Leadership

When people accept responsibility for their own conduct and for the well-being of others, ethics serves to stabilize society. Ethical leadership is the antidote to despair and cynicism that is crushing our spirit and clouding our future. Ethics is our hope.

Gary Edwards

One of the charges that a former president made to top government officials was to "be ethical." Indeed, from the highest leadership post in America to board rooms and community organizations, ethics are attracting attention. Given the charge to "be ethical," what should be the expectations?

Ethics are concerned with moral duties which indicate how people should behave. It assures that there is a distinction between good and evil and right and wrong and that individuals have a moral obligation to do their best to discover and do the right thing.

Most people in public service and leadership positions in their communities are, at the core, idealists who care about others and want to make positive changes in society. Because these people are working on behalf of others, they are expected, even in the face of tempting personal or political gains, to do the "right" thing as determined by certain universal and timeless values essential to the ethical life.

This program topic is designed to help increase participants':

- ♥ **Commitment** - increase the desire to do the right thing,
- ♥ **Consciousness** - heighten awareness of ethical implications of decisions and actions as they relate to a core set of moral values and ethical principles, and

♥ **Competencies** - be able to engage in principled reasoning and problem solving as they relate to ethical conduct.

Preparing to Teach the Topic

You will need to review these materials before the training. In addition, review current newspapers or magazines (local and national) for articles dealing with ethical behavior and/or problems in today's society. You may want to have some of these articles available for discussion.

Talk with leaders in your community. Ask about their views and understanding of ethical leadership and behavior.

Secure copies of the participant leaflet (WL 352) for each member of your group.

What are Ethics?

Hand out copies of the participant leaflet to each member. You may want them to read the first page and answer the questions outlined. Refer to the symbol on participant leaflet.

The three-sided logo symbolizes the integration of the three qualities of an ethical leader: knowledge, action and character.

Society puts great emphasis on the intellectual and practical skills that make up the **knowledge** and **action** sides of the logo, sometimes to the exclusion of **character**. Virtue and ethics may easily be sacrificed to the pressures of the moment, and those whom we may consider to have the most knowledge often seem the least trustworthy. It's time to focus some attention on ethical training, to restoring character as a full partner to knowledge and action, so that we may have truly ethical leadership.

Is ethics an idea whose time has come again? Or are we looking for a simple solution to the complex issues facing people and society? What is happening in America that encourages a renewed interest in ethics? *(Allow time for discussion. You may want to refer to some of the news items you have found.)*

Some people seem to be asserting individual rights and exploring the boundaries of regulations and ethical conduct. "Look out for No. 1," whether ethically or not so ethically, has replaced "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." At the same time, competition and lack of consequences for misbehavior have fueled the idea that honesty is not always the best policy and that cheaters often prosper.

The changing characteristics of the world population are altering politics, education, and culture. It is not acceptable to expect persons from various cultures to act, speak, or think in the same way. Yet, there must be some common ground on which people from all backgrounds can stand against violence, hate, and a spiral toward mediocrity or worse.

Values, Morals, and Ethics

The language of ethics becomes confusing when society uses the terms "values," "ethics," and "morals" interchangeably. What are the differences among values, morals, and ethics? What values are held by a "person of character"? Can a set of principles provide a foundation for our society, yet respect the diversity of individuals?

(Ask members to complete the questions on the front side of the participant leaflet. Use their answers as you discuss the three concepts of values, morals, and ethics.)

Values are core beliefs or desires that guide and motivate attitudes and actions. Everyone has thousands of values, ethical and nonethical. **Ethical values** are concerned with beliefs about what is right. They include caring, fairness, and responsibility. **Nonethical values** relate to things we like, desire, or deem personally important. These ethically neutral values may include wealth, fame, or pleasure. Values are motivators to action.

Morals refer to an individual's beliefs about what is right and wrong. Morals are a personal evaluation of values and behaviors, especially concerning matters of religion, sex, drinking, gambling, etc. Morals can also serve as an internal alarm system.

Ethics refers to standards of conduct that indicate how people ought to behave based on specific values and principles that define what is right. Ethics deals with the ability to distinguish right from wrong, and the commitment to do what is right.

Individuals make choices based on their value systems according to their own morality. They may or may not choose to behave ethically. Some personal value systems are unethical according to the standards of behavior that most people agree upon.

(Read the following stories to the group. Discuss their relationship to ethical behavior.)

Self-deception

At the turn of the century, a Russian noblewoman attended a play. In the play, a Russian peasant died. Being a compassionate woman, she cried as she left the theater, whereupon she discovered that her footman had frozen while waiting outside.

Leading by example

A young child stole a pencil from a local store. He was caught and brought home by the police. The father handled the situation by paying for the pencil and making the child apologize. Once the parent and child were alone, the father said, "Son, why in the world did you steal that pencil? I can't believe you did that. I've always taught you to be honest and not to steal. If you needed that pencil so badly, why didn't you tell me? I would have taken one from the office."

(Discuss the questions in the participant leaflet about ethical people. Make a list of who members believe are ethical. List the characteristics. How do these characteristics relate to the six pillars of character outlined in the member's leaflet?)

Ask members to answer the following question: If people who know you well were asked to name an ethical person, what proportion do you think would name you? Why or why not? How do members rate their ethics as compared to most other persons?)

Ethical Decision Making

Values and ethics are silent but mighty partners in decision making. Every decision, from everyday habits to once-in-a-lifetime dilemmas, has an ethical dimension.

Most people want to do the right thing. Making ethical choices is complex because of the competing interests and values built into most situations. One goal of this program is to bring the influence of ethics and values into members' consciousness, so that we can look at our decisions more objectively. Doing this probably will result in more fair and caring decisions.

Frequently, ethical issues revolve around right versus wrong, eliminating clearly unethical options. Doing the right thing, not doing the wrong thing.

The simplest situation is when there is a clear right answer and a wrong answer. For example: Do you lie or tell the truth? or Do you keep your promise not to share a secret or do you share it with "just" one person?

The story is told of the Nazi commander knocking on the door of a family who was thought to harbor Jews. "Do you have any Jews in here?" he asked. The family member had to weigh the values of honesty, responsibility, caring, fairness, and citizenship. In this case the answer was, "No, we have no Jews here." The person put the values of caring and justice over the values of honesty and citizenship (following the law) in this situation.

Choosing to be Ethical

As we become more conscious of everyday ethical behavior, there are several models to which we can refer for a more objective approach to ethical decision making.

There are some personal warning systems. (From the Josephson Institute of Ethics.) Ask yourself these questions. Your answers will provide clues to your course of action.

1. **Kid on Your Shoulder** - Would you be comfortable if your children were watching you; are you setting the example you want them to follow?
2. **Front Page of Newspaper** - Would you be comfortable if your reasoning and decision were to be publicized?
3. **Golden Rule** - Are you treating others as you want to be treated? Are you treating others as you honestly think they want to be treated?
4. **Rule of Universality** - If everyone did this, would it still be OK?

For example: You are alone and find a \$50 bill outside a small restaurant. What will you do?

1. **Kid on Your Shoulder** - Imagine that your 5-year-old and 7-year-old children are with you. You have been stressing honesty to them. Does being a role model make any difference in your decision?
2. **Front Page of Newspaper** - Write two imaginary stories about finding the money. In one, you pocket the money, and in the other, you go back inside the restaurant and give the money to the cashier. Which story do you like better?
3. **Golden Rule** - Imagine you are the person who lost the money. Which would you like to have happen?
4. **Rule of Universality** - If everybody kept the money they found, what difference would it make? Is it OK only if the money is loose? What about taking the cash out of a wallet with no identification? Would it be OK if everybody did it?

Another way of looking at decisions ethically, relate to the **Bell, Book and Candle test**.

BELL - Listen for the bells warning you of an ethical issue.

BOOK - Check to see if there are any laws, regulations, or rules that would govern/restrict your choices.

CANDLE - How will your decision look in the light? Could a reasonable and fair-minded person conclude you acted properly?

(Read the following story. Ask members how they would react. Discuss the decision as it relates to the Bell, Book and Candle test.)

You are the youth leader of your neighborhood group. Several youths want to attend summer camp but do not have enough money, so your group has been fundraising. Another parent calls and is excited to tell you that a local business has agreed to sponsor the costs of five kids. They want the kids to come to the business for a day so they can get to know them. Because they make pizza, you know that the kids will be excited. Then, you remember that the business recently was fined for hiring kids too young for employment. Do you accept the money?

BELL - Listen for the bells warning of an ethical issue. The youth leader heard a bell when she remembered the reputation of the business. If she dismisses the bell, then she can rejoice with the parent at finding a sponsor. What harm will it do the kids? the youth program?

BOOK - Are there any laws or regulations concerning the matter? If the bell is listened to, the next step is to check out rules and regulations. The youth leader reminds the parent of the business' problem, and says that more discussion and background work will be necessary before accepting the funds. Upon checking, she finds out that there are no rules that would restrict the group from accepting the gift.

CANDLE - Could a fair person say you acted responsibly? The youth leader decides that this is a matter the parents and older youths should discuss and decide. They need to consider what others outside the group might think of their group if they enter into a relationship with the business. The parents of the youths who may or may not be able to attend camp should also be included in the decision making. After discussion and debate about the matter, a decision is made.

Doing the Right Thing

Why might the best ethical alternative not always be selected and acted upon? A number of reasons, excuses, and justifications are commonly used to fool ourselves into doing other than the best. Among the most common rationalizations used to justify unethical conduct are:

1. If it's necessary, it's ethical.
2. If it's legal and permissible, it's proper. This substitutes legal requirements for personal moral judgment.
3. I was just doing it for you. Often used for "white lies" or withholding important information in personal and professional relationships.
4. I'm just fighting fire with fire.

5. It doesn't hurt anyone. OK to violate principles as long as there is no clear and immediate harm to others.
6. It can't be wrong--everyone's doing it. A false safety in numbers.
7. It's OK if I don't gain personally.
8. I've got it coming. Persons who feel they are overworked or underpaid often rationalize that minor "perks" or the acceptance of favors, etc., are fair compensation.
9. I can still be objective. Does the person providing you with the benefit believe it will not affect your judgment in any way? Would it be offered if you were in no position to help provider?

In conclusion, none of us is quite as good as we think we are. And none of us is nearly as good as we could be. The real test of ethics is whether we are willing to do the right thing when it is not in our self-interest to do so.

References

- Gregory, D., Program Associate. "Leadership Development" Department of Agriculture Economics and Rural Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University.
- Josephson, Michael. **Ethics: Easier Said Than Done**, Volumes 19 and 20. Marina Del Rey, Calif: Josephson Institute of Ethics. 1992.
- Josephson, Michael. Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics. Marina Del Rey, Calif.
- Scheffert, Donna Rae and Hamersly, Marjory. **Enhancing Ethical Leadership**. A Family Community Leadership program. St. Paul: The University of Minnesota Extension Service. 1993.
- Walker, Katey. "Values, Ethics, and Ethical Decision-Making." **Adult Learning**. Vol. 5, No. 2, November/December 1993. pp. 13-14+.

1995: .5M