

Guidelines for Ethical Choices

1. Apply the morning-after test
2. Apply the front-page test
3. Apply the mirror test
4. Apply the role-reversal test
5. Apply the common-sense test

FIGURE 4-1 Guidelines in determining ethical choices.

concepts of *legal* and *ethical*. They are not the same thing. Just because an option is legal, it is not necessarily ethical as well.

In fact, it is not uncommon for people caught in the practice of questionable behavior to use the “I didn’t do anything illegal” defense. A person’s behavior can be well within the scope of the law and still be unethical. The following guidelines for determining ethical behavior assume that the behavior in question is legal (Figures 4-1 and 4-2).

- Apply the **morning-after test**. This test asks, “If you make this choice, how will you feel about it tomorrow morning?”
- Apply the **front-page test**. This test encourages you to make a decision that would not embarrass you if it were a story on the front page of your hometown newspaper.
- Apply the **mirror test**. This test asks, “If you make this decision, how will you feel about yourself when you look in the mirror?”
- Apply the **role-reversal test**. This test requires that you trade places with the people affected by your decision and view the decision through their eyes.
- Apply the **common-sense test**. This test requires that you listen to what your instincts and common sense are telling you. If it feels wrong, it probably is.

Checklist of Ethics Models

In addition to the various tests that can be used for determining ethical behavior, there are also numerous models:

- Categorical imperative (black and white)
- Conventionalistic ethic (anything legal is ethical)
- Disclosure rule (explain actions to a wide audience)
- Doctrine of the mean (virtue through moderation)
- Golden rule (do unto others . . .)
- Intuition rule (what is right is known)
- Market ethic (whatever makes a profit is right)
- Means-end ethic (end justifies the means)
- Might-equals-right ethic
- Organization ethic (loyalty to the organization)
- Practical imperative (treat people as ends, not means)
- Equal freedom (full freedom unless it deprives another)
- Proportionality ethic (good outweighs the bad)
- Professional ethic (do only what can be explained to your peers)
- Revelation ethic (answers revealed by prayer)
- Rights ethic (protect rights of others)
- Theory of justice (impartial, evenhanded)

FIGURE 4-2 Models for determining what the ethical choice is when making decisions.

Blanchard and Peale suggest their own test for deciding what the ethical choice is in a given situation.² Their test consists of the following three questions:

1. Is it legal?
2. Is it balanced?
3. How will it make me feel about myself?

If a potential course of action is not legal, no further consideration is in order. If an action is not legal, it is also not ethical, because ethical behavior requires that the law be obeyed. If an action is balanced, it is fair to all involved. This means that construction professionals and other personnel have responsibilities that extend well beyond the walls of their unit, organization, and company. If a course of action is in keeping with your own moral structure, it will make you feel good about yourself. Blanchard and Peale also list the following *Five Ps of Ethical Power*:

1. **Purpose.** Individuals see themselves as ethical people who let their conscience be their guide and, in all cases, want to feel good about themselves.
2. **Pride.** Individuals apply internal guidelines and have sufficient self-esteem to make decisions that may not be popular with others.
3. **Patience.** Individuals believe right will prevail in the long run, and they are willing to wait when necessary.
4. **Persistence.** Individuals are willing to stay with an ethical course of action once it has been chosen and to see it through to a positive conclusion.
5. **Perspective.** Individuals take the time to reflect and are guided by their own internal barometer when making ethical decisions.³

These tests and guidelines help construction professionals make ethical choices in the workplace. In addition to internalizing the guidelines themselves, construction professionals may want to share these values with all employees with whom they interact.

ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN ORGANIZATIONS

Research by Trevino suggests that ethical behavior in organizations is influenced by both individual and social factors.⁴ Trevino identified three personality measures that can influence an employee’s ethical behavior: (1) *ego strength*, (2) *Machiavellianism*, and (3) *locus of control*.

An employee’s **ego strength** is his or her ability to undertake self-directed tasks and to cope with tense situations. A measure of a worker’s **Machiavellianism** is the extent to which he or she will attempt to deceive and confuse others. **Locus of control** is the perspective of workers concerning who or what controls their behavior. Employees with an internal locus of control feel that they control their own behavior. Employees with an external locus of control feel that their behavior is controlled by external factors (such as rules, regulations, or the supervisor).

Social factors can also influence ethical behavior in organizations. These factors include gender, role differences, religion, age, work experience, nationality, and the influence of other people, who are significant in an individual’s life. People learn appropriate behavior by observing the behavior of significant role models (such as parents, teachers, public officials, and supervisors). Because construction professionals represent a significant role model for their employees, it is critical that they exhibit ethical behavior that is beyond reproach in all situations.

CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS’ ROLE IN ETHICS

Using the guidelines set forth in the previous section, construction professionals should be able to make responsible decisions concerning ethical choices. Unfortunately, deciding what is ethical is much easier than actually doing what is ethical. In this regard, trying to practice ethics is like trying to diet. It is not just a matter of *knowing* you should cut down on eating; it is a matter of actually *doing* it.

This fact defines the role of construction professionals with regard to ethics. Their role has three parts. First, they are responsible for setting an example of ethical behavior. Second, they are responsible for helping fellow employees make the right decision when facing ethical questions. Finally, construction professionals are responsible for helping employees follow through and actually undertake the ethical option once the appropriate choice has been identified. In carrying out their roles, construction professionals can adopt one of the following approaches: the best-ratio approach, the black-and-white approach, or the full-potential approach (Figure 4-3).

Best-Ratio Approach

The **best-ratio approach** is the pragmatic option. It assumes that people are basically good and, under the right circumstances, behave ethically. However, under certain conditions, they can be driven to unethical behavior. Therefore, construction professionals should do everything possible to create conditions that promote ethical behavior and try to maintain the highest possible ratio of good choices to bad. When hard decisions must be made, the appropriate choice is the one that does the most good for the most people. This is sometimes referred to as *situational ethics*.

Black-and-White Approach

With the **black-and-white approach**, right is right, wrong is wrong, and circumstances are irrelevant. The construction professional’s job is to make ethical decisions and carry them out and, in addition, to help employees choose the ethical route. When difficult decisions must be made, construction professionals should make fair and impartial choices, regardless of the outcome.

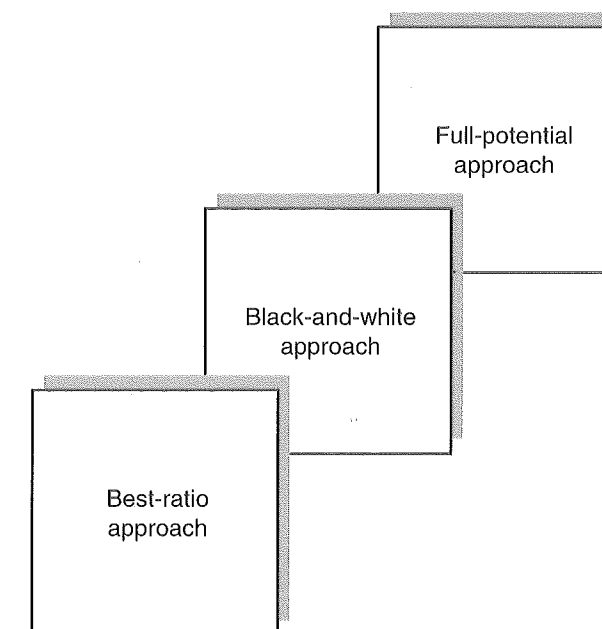


FIGURE 4-3 Three basic approaches to handling ethical problems.

Full-Potential Approach

Construction professionals who use the **full-potential approach** make decisions based on how the outcomes affect the ability of those involved to achieve their full potential. The underlying philosophy is that people are responsible for realizing their full potential within the confines of morality. Choices that can achieve this goal without infringing on the rights of others are considered ethical.

Decisions made may differ, depending on the approach selected. For example, consider the ethical dilemma presented at the beginning of this chapter. If the safety engineer, Camillo Rodriguez, applies the best-ratio approach, he may decide to keep quiet, encourage the proper use of PPE, and hope for the best. On the other hand, if he takes the black-and-white approach, he will be compelled to confront SPC’s management team with what he knows.

COMPANY’S ROLE IN ETHICS

Construction companies, like all businesses, have a critical role to play in promoting ethical behavior among their employees. Construction professionals cannot set ethical examples alone or expect employees to behave ethically in a vacuum. A company’s role in ethics can be summarized as (1) creating an internal environment that promotes, expects, and rewards ethical behavior and (2) setting an example of ethical behavior in all external dealings.

Creating an Ethical Environment

A company creates an **ethical environment** by establishing policies and practices that ensure that all employees are treated ethically and then enforcing these policies. Do employees have