Boards That Work

Ethical Dilemmas

There are many definitions of ethics, but they all come down to "A set of principles of right conduct."

It might seem obvious that your nonprofit should choose to do the 'right' thing when confronted with difficult decisions, but most ethical dilemmas don't present simple choices.

In this resource, we pose a few questions to guide your discussions about the particular ethical dilemma your organization may be facing.

Questions to ask when faced with an ethical dilemma

1. Do I have all the facts about the situation? Is there another viewpoint that I haven't considered? What else do I need to know and how can I get that information?

2. What are central values that are being challenged in this situation? Decide which of the following values are involved and rank them in order of how important they are to the problem.

   - Honesty
   - Integrity
   - Fairness
   - Respect for others
   - Caring for others
   - Accountability
   - Safeguarding public trust
   - Doing good work
   - Pursuit of excellence
   - Doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people

3. Who's involved? Who is driving the issue? Is it clients, staff, board members, donors, volunteers or other stakeholders? Who will be affected by the issue and how?

4. What's the 'worst case scenario'? What impact will it have on the people and on our organization? How serious is this situation in the overall scheme of things?

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Questions to ask when considering alternative solutions to ethical dilemmas

1. Would I be comfortable if this decision went viral on social media?

2. Would I be comfortable if my children (or someone else's children) were observing me?

3. Can I apply the Golden Rule to this situation? Would I be happy with this solution if I was on the receiving end?

4. Does this alternative promote or detract from our mission?

5. Does this alternative strengthen or weaken my personal integrity?

6. Does this solution strengthen or weaken our relationships with our stakeholders?

Codes of ethics

There are a number of associations and organizations, listed below, that have developed codes of ethics that apply largely to fundraising issues. Note that accounting, legal and medical professions also have codes of ethics.

Association of Fundraising Professionals - https://afpglobal.org/ethics/code-ethics

Association for Healthcare Philanthropy -   https://www.ahp.org/about-AHP/governance/professional-standards-of-conduct

Donor Bill of Rights -   https://afpglobal.org/donor-bill-rights

The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) Statement of Ethics - https://www.case.org/Samples_Research_and_Tools/Ethics_Resources_and_Issues/CASE_Statement_of_Ethics.html