

## Ethics-Centered Leadership: Integrating Values into Decision-Making

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The principle of Ethical Decision-Making can be summed up in two words: “Doing the Right Thing”. In practice, however, ethical decision-making requires far more than simply “doing the right thing”. A leader must apply fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect while balancing short-term demands with long-term consequences as well as personal values with organizational goals. Ethical decision-making is seldom quick and easy; however, it is consistently the most important leadership asset of all—Trust.

Through many years of experience leading an organization, I have found that a leader’s ethical compass shapes and ultimately determines the organization’s direction. When leaders demonstrate integrity in their actions, individuals within the organization feel safe, valued, respected, and supported. It is therefore evident that ethical decision-making is more than just a skill; it is also a commitment and represents the promise of consistency between what a leader says and what a leader does.

In my nearly 25 years of experience leading teams through numerous organizational changes, I can attest that the ethical foundation of leadership is essential to its success, as the environment in which leaders operate continually evolves with changes in strategy, trends, and technology. Ethical principles provide a measure for determining whether leaders' decisions inspire commitment and loyalty or erode trust and credibility within the organization.

Ethical decision-making has become a fundamental competency of agile leadership. Historically, ethical decision-making was viewed as merely a compliance requirement; today, it is a fundamental requirement for success in strategic agile environments. Agile leaders operate in fast-paced, dynamic environments that require quick decisions, and ethical clarity is vital to ensure that decisions do not sacrifice integrity in the name of adaptability.

Over time, ethical leadership builds trust within an organization and supports sustained long-term success. Leaders who consistently consider fairness and transparency when making decisions create a culture of loyalty, commitment, engagement, and psychological safety within the organization. In contrast, leaders who employ ethical shortcuts or make ethical compromises may experience short-term improvements, yet will often do irreparable damage to the organization's reputation, culture, and cohesiveness over time.

Every ethical leadership experience includes moments of significance — conflict between core values and external or internal pressures, expectations, or self-interest at an ethical crossroad. When faced with an ethical conflict between honesty and comfort, fairness and popularity, or integrity and approval, such experiences may create discomfort or isolation for the leader. Yet, at these moments, those experiences will define leadership legitimacy more than the permission granted through authority.

Leaders regularly encounter ethical dilemmas, such as conflicts of interest, pressure to deliver results regardless of circumstances, the handling of confidential information, and the need to balance transparency and sensitivity. The way a leader reacts in the midst of an ethical dilemma reflects their commitment to the organization's core values and provides a foundation for the organization's culture.

Ethical dilemmas are an inherent part of all leadership. The most significant issue is determining the extent to which leaders are prepared to address ethical dilemmas through awareness, courage, and a strong ethical commitment. By enhancing ethical reasoning and embedding it in day-to-day decision-making, a leader can build trust, establish a clear organizational identity, and create an environment conducive to achieving a positive long-term impact on the organization.