

Maximize your leadership potential: **BUILD TRUST**

Integrity

Making Ethical Decisions: A Practical Guide

Leaders make decisions every day – often with insufficient information, competing demands, and little time. Ethical decision making, however, is at the heart of your integrity as a leader. Sometimes a quick check can help clarify a decision and the extent to which it is, or is not, in line with your principles and those of your organization. To help managers make quick, ethical decisions, the Ethics Resource Center (www.ethics.org) defined the following process. The model includes both the steps of the decision-making process and ethical “filters” (known by the acronym PLUS) for consideration at specific steps in the process. We will describe the steps first and then the (PLUS) ethical filters.

Ethical decision making in action: the steps

Step 1: Define the problem (PLUS)

Often we will jump to solutions before we’ve clarified the problem. It’s important to start with a clear understanding of the problem. What outcomes did we expect or want? What are we actually getting? Remember, the way you define the problem will drive your search for a solution!

Step 2: Identify alternatives

Try to identify at least three – ideally, at least five – alternatives. We tend to see our options in terms of either/or when there often a range of alternatives.

Step 3: Evaluate the alternatives (PLUS)

Use the old fashioned pro/con list to evaluate the alternatives. Studies of decision making have shown it helps. It forces us to see each alternative from more than one perspective. Also, it is very important to distinguish what you think from what you really know. Many decisions have been bungled because someone treated an assumption as a known truth. Be very careful of advice like, “You’ll never be able to do that at UF!” Is that really true or just someone’s assumption?

Step 4: Make the decision

Pay attention to timing. You want to make an informed decision, but waiting too long is a decision in itself.

Step 5: Implement the decision

Many good decisions fail because the implementation of the decision wasn’t considered carefully enough. Who needs to know? How can we let them know as quickly and effectively as possible?

Step 6: Evaluate the decision (PLUS)

What measures will we use to determine whether this was a good decision? How will we get feedback?

Why it matters?

People don’t follow a leader they don’t trust. They might comply, but they don’t willingly follow. At the heart of trust is integrity and at the heart of integrity is ethics. If your colleagues or team members don’t perceive you as ethical, you are finished as an effective leader. Your integrity – in their eyes – is low, and trust just won’t happen. We don’t trust people that aren’t ethical. It’s that simple.

Ethical decision making in action: the ethical “filters” (PLUS)

In addition to following the steps above, this process recommends that you consider some ethical “filters” at key points in your decision making process.

P=Policy

Unfortunately, managers will make decisions without a full understanding of UF policies (e.g., regarding the UF disciplinary process). It’s worth taking time to understand the UF policies that relate to a particular decision and asking, “Is my decision consistent with UF policies?” As noted above, it’s not enough to have heard from someone who heard from someone else who saw how the same type of situation was handled 20 years ago! Get the information from people that truly know.

L=Legal

What laws apply to this decision? Is it acceptable under the applicable laws and regulations? Just as with policies, many managers haven’t considered if there are laws (e.g., FMLA, FLSA) that apply to a decision. Make sure your decision is informed and complies with applicable laws.

U=Universal

Does it conform to the universal principles/values my organization has adopted? Most colleges and administrative units at UF have stated values. Does my decision reflect those values? If it were on the front page of the Gainesville Sun, could we explain the decision in light of those values?

S=Self

Does it satisfy my personal definition of right, good, and fair? Every leader should have a sense of her or his own values – those things that are deeply important to her or him. Decisions – especially tough decisions – should reflect those values in a consistent way. Does this decision reflect the kind of person that I want to be?

As described above, it’s especially important to consider these ethical filters in steps 1, 3, and 6 – when defining the problem, evaluating alternatives, and evaluating the final decision itself.

The ethical decision-making model in action

The model gives managers a helpful check by providing a thoughtful decision-making process in a way that also surfaces important ethical considerations. When you make decisions, the people on your team and in your organization are watching. Make sure your decisions are consistently thoughtful and constantly reflect your values and the values of your organization. Making good decisions that reflect who you are at your best – especially in difficult circumstances – is at the heart of leadership, integrity, and trust.