



Ethical decision making in an unscrupulous world - How leaders can still make principled decisions

Whatever You Can Get-Away With

Let me tell you a story: More than a decade ago I was sitting on Balmoral beach in Sydney and bumped into an old school friend named John. John has one of the great minds of our generation, intellectually gifted and diligent to boot. John had with him and was reading a book on Rupert Murdoch and I remarked that I didn't like Murdoch's behaviour. John took offense and said that it was not Murdoch's responsibility to do the right thing but the responsibility of governments and legislators to regulate and control what people did; that Murdoch, like all of us, should do whatever he can to achieve his own ends within the limits of the law.

I protested, saying people have an ethical obligation to strive for what is right. John thought I was a bleeding heart, a chump and soft-headed. In that moment I realised that most people don't really have a sense of doing the right thing, outside of what is mandated by the law, or religion or something else - what I really mean, is that most people's sense of right and wrong has been defined by someone else or originates outside of them, perhaps from the norms in society, at any one time.

There was a time, however, when I would have said, that we each have an inner conscience that knows when you are being dishonest or shady or not being true. As Christopher Hitchens once said, any person of average moral equipment has this knowledge or awareness, this internal witness; summed-up like this: 'Why do people behave well, even when no one is looking; even when doing right will not do you any good; when you get nothing for it. There was a time when we all knew exactly what that meant, but on the whole, society doesn't seem to work like this anymore.

In fact, I would argue the overriding approach today is that people feel a 'right' to pursue what they want and if prevented from doing so, then they feel aggrieved, that some individual freedom has been impinged or encroached upon - it appears to me, that the concept of a 'common good' is not only irrelevant in most people's decision making process, but is alien to them.

Are Ethical Decisions Possible, Today?

When I ask: Are ethical decisions possible, today?; what I am really asking is: Can we agree, today, what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong? Which begs the question: Is there a universal truth today or more correctly, can we agree on what that is? And if we can't agree on 'facts', and our polarised society would indicate that we can't, then I would argue that it is impossible to have a truly functioning society, that we've lost our benchmark for decision making and even for civil discourse. When one listens to the divided and opposed opinions which get airtime today and the vitriol and outrage that accompanies it, where each 'side' vehemently believes it is right, then there is no doubt, in my mind, we have entered a state described by Oliver Stone, when he said: Hell is the impossibility of reason. Without facts, without truth, we can't reason, and that is a state of 'hell'.

Worse, I would argue you can't have ethical decision making in a 'amoral' world and by amoral I mean values-less world; not that there are no morals or values but that they don't have currency today. The example I have been sharing of late looks at the difference in the way Presidents Clinton and Trump navigated their sexual indiscretions. Yes, Clinton tried to cover it up and lied about it and deflected but there was never any question that the sexual indiscretion, if it happened, was wrong and that he behaved badly - that was an agreed truth. Contrast this with Trump. Anyone should be able to see that what he said he did to various women was morally repugnant, but he gloated about it, laughed it off, said that when you are famous you can do these things ... and so many women agreed and more than 50-million people voted for him and, he became President! As Jonathan Haidt wrote: We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth.

We have lost the benchmark to agree what is right and wrong and once this truth is lost, how can we determine which way is up?

It would be a mistake to assume that it is only the unprincipled that fall victim to ethical violation – we are all living in a world which has become morally unhinged, cast adrift in an ambiguous and dubious culture. More so, many of us are living inside an illusion of ‘freedom’, meaning a perverted sense that autonomy and free-will ought to be unencumbered by considerations outside of ‘self’, a perversion that one has the right to do whatever they want. In this state, many of us have become disconnected from what is right and what is wrong.

It is the victory of the self, the ego - an increasingly egocentric existence - beyond selfish, where only our own desires and urges are considered. Now, everything is up for grabs with little reference to notions of right and wrong.

Unmoored from an ethical or moral compass, people are guided only by their own ‘wants’ - a state of self-absorbed individualism and narcissism – both, thinking they should be able to do whatever they desire and shamelessly complaining when they are prevented from exercising this perceived right. In a world where there has never before been such material wealth, there is also this belief in the supremacy of personal control and authority. Perhaps Lincoln said it best: Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.

If I am correct, then ethics has lost its currency, been rendered redundant!

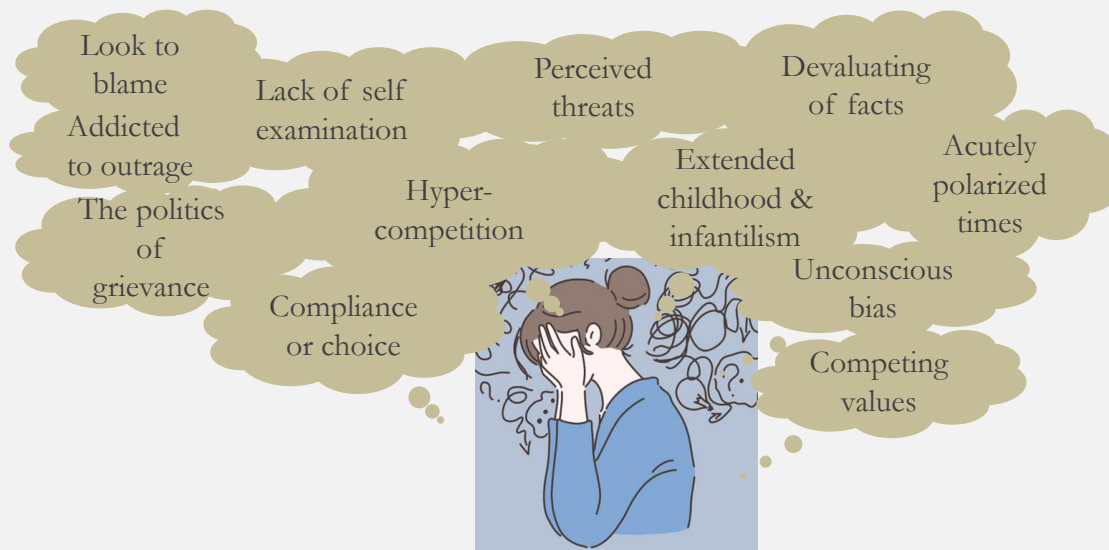
Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws - Plato

What is Ethics?

Nearly 2500-years ago, Socrates offered us a lens for ethical decision making with his famous words: The unexamined life is not worth living. What we now know, is that making ethical decisions is dependant, in many ways, on knowing yourself. Making good choices and sound decisions requires us to know ourselves and that self-aware people are far more effective in all domains, including the quality of their decisions. Simply, the more we get in touch with ourselves, the better able we are to make conscious choices about how to respond to our world.

Basically, ethics refers to standards and practices that guide how we ought to act in the difficult situations in which we find ourselves. For this reason, self-awareness, self-knowledge and consciousness, matters. Ethics provide guidance in cases where no specific rule is in place, or the rule is not sufficient or where matters are genuinely unclear. Ethics demands something more than compliance; it’s about exercising judgment and accepting responsibility for the decisions we make and the action we take. In this way, ethics is personal leadership in action; it is ‘doing the right things’. (When I talk of leadership, I talk of the choices you make and the action you take. I am certainly not talking about some hierarchy or position one holds and I assert that in any moment, we all have the ability to ‘lead’ by the choices we make and the action we take).

Ethics is not the same as religion or following the law, it is not the same as cultural norms and it is not science. In its simplest form, ethics is the reflection upon the question: What ought one do? But what does it mean to make ethical decisions today – as I look around, the golden (ethical) rule of: Do unto others as you would have them do to you, appears alien to most people.



A wonderful man recently shared with me the struggle he was having trying to help his daughter who was often upset and saddened about the state of the world and the many causes she wanted to attend to. While certainly understanding the father's desire to ameliorate the daughter's distress, I suggested that hers was perhaps the only rational and healthy response if one is to look at society objectively and accurately; that any other response calls forth either a big dose of denial (and it's attendant chirpiness) or an unhealthy numbness (and it's inevitable withdrawal), both a sign of mental ill-health. As writer and philosopher, Krishnamurti said: It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

There's no doubt we have all been through the mill. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic I was saying that we were living through an accelerated change environment with an extraordinary lack of certainty. But now, volatility has been amplified and people are seeking certainty where there is none, seeking assurance about their world view which has been dealt an almighty blow, after almighty blow. Worse than this, we are living in a society that pits us against each other via the terrible forces of individualism and consumerism and hyper-competition, which devalues our humanness and connection to one another, which acts against our ability to be our best-selves. As such, we are living in a time of the politics of grievance, where people are addicted to outrage and look for someone to blame for how they are feeling. In a world of prolonged infantilism, people do not grow up, they do not examine their selves and want all their desires met. Looking around for someone to blame when we don't get our way has become a social past-time. It is a crappy situation, one that makes decisions so difficult; irrespective of the decisions we make, we can feel like frauds, that we are not being genuine or authentic.

But is it that ethics has failed or is it that the codes of ethics have failed, the laws, regulations and other orders of control, have failed? Since time immemorial, legislators have tried to devise rules to curb the impulses of humans but more than at any other time, people seem to experience laws and regulations as a burden to cast off – that is, they are not seen as 'good for us' and the concept of 'doing the ethical thing' is either laughed at or scorned – like one is dim-witted for even considering it. Here's what I think, the idea that we can impose rules and regulations on a amoral populace, where we cannot agree what is right and wrong, where truth is determined by who gets the most airtime on social media, only leads to a war against the laws and regulations themselves. More than this, codes of ethics fail because they are imposed in the vain hope of introducing certainty and predictability in a world where there is very little of either, so much so, that most nations and institutions have substituted an understanding of ethics for a set of rules or codes, which only exacerbate the problem and compromise the development of a personal moral compass, like my friend John, at the top of this piece.

But the sad truth is that codes of ethics fail because ethics have become redundant. It is not that they should be redundant but that they are.

Codes of ethics fail in a culture which is not ethical, where vices like greed and excess and lust and pride and cheating and cynicism have become virtues that drive human behaviour and; where traditional virtues like hope and justice and temperance and prudence are regarded as soft-headed or 'woosey'; that not being uber-competitive and aggressive and getting your own way is indicative of some kind of personal failure.

The Problem with Our Brains

Why are we in this position? While it is easy to blame the politics of division and the three great ills of modern societies (individualism and consumerism and hyper-competition), and I do, there are also biological and very human reasons.

Perhaps the greatest thinker on the planet today is Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Laureate and all-round brilliant scholar. Looking at the accepted wisdom which had persisted for eons, which believed that human judgement was rational, that people made decisions based on the facts, Kahneman proved that we are not rational at all and that when we face uncertainty, we resort to familiar patterns of behaviour, even when they are harmful to us.

You see, we have some 80 000 thoughts a day; about 80% are negative and about 95% are the same thoughts as the previous day. Especially over the past 2-years, it is impossible not to feel that we are on a repetitive, continuous, negative loop. This matters because the decisions we make are influenced by the emotions we feel and we are mostly experiencing negative emotions; the same ones, over and over. Worse still, the brain is a pattern recognising machine and we are hard wired to take shortcuts. Given we are exposed to about 11-million pieces of data a second and that we can only process about 40 of those consciously, more than 99% of our data processing is happening unconsciously. Our natural state is to make flawed decisions and experience prejudice.

Further, we are living in an age of anxiety, what is known as a chronic state of arousal, a constant state of threat and uncertainty. This is bad news because the human brain perceives uncertainty as a threat and shuts down the thinking rational brain, shuts down the part of our brain that learns. In this chronic state, we don't feel safe – we are now passengers to our emotional brain, hijacked and blindly reacting to the world around us.



Our brains are simply not structured to respond to situations with fidelity but rather they predict based on patterns they recognise. More often than not we get it wrong – our predictions are incorrect and as Kahneman so beautifully teaches us; We do not perceive reality as it actually is; we perceive what we expect!

Yet, almost all of us are convinced that our view of the world is accurate and that the decisions we make are rational and the action we take is logical. This is simply incorrect. The costs are high and some of the behavioural, emotional, physical and cognitive costs are set out on the following page.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ Impulse to put off tasks, like tough conversations ✘ Wish to seek more information and delay decisions ✘ Instinct to wait for signals from others and to seek their assurance | <p>Emotional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ Feeling nervous and a loss of confidence in our own ability ✘ Feeling worried particularly about relationships, money, health, the future ✘ Feeling apprehensive about action we ought to take ✘ A sense of being evaluated and unfairly judged or blamed |
| <p>Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ General feeling of being sick which may include things like increased heart rate, sweaty palms and nausea ✘ So many of us are feeling a heightened restlessness and yet a deep fatigue – what a terrible dichotomy ✘ Exhaustion levels have increased exponentially | <p>Cognitive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ Fear of unknown or not willing to go beyond our comfort zone ✘ Mental rehearsal or rumination and paralysis about the action to take ✘ Cognitive errors; the quality of our work suffers, as does our efficiency – we see an overall drop in productivity ✘ Avoiding decisions, especially about the right action to take |

Evolutionary and Physiological Factors are a Handbrake on Our Ability to Make Sound Ethical Decisions

Our ethics are also tossed into a wash of turbulence. The inevitable manifestation of our current environment is that people are more likely to ‘cheat’, to be guided by personal urges and desires and to act in ethically dubious ways. At the best of times, we are not equipped to think long-term, or consider alternatives and these are certainly not the best of times.

I had an article published more than a decade ago called: *The Cheating Cycles* and my research showed that many convicted cheaters complained that their behaviour was simply to keep pace with others, to even the playing field, to fix some perceived injustice or unfairness and that cheating is especially easy to justify when you frame situations to cast yourself as a victim of some kind of unfairness.

Intuitively, people are more likely to ‘cheat’, when they feel that others around them are cheating. And when we lower the bar, when world leaders are not being held accountable for indiscretions, then it normalises the behaviour and has a corrosive effect on our ability to recognise what is right or wrong.

While I am not condoning the cheating or trying to say that society is to blame, I am suggesting that we live in a world that is obsessed with getting ahead and terrified of losing, and that this makes morally questionable behaviour, far more likely: That the more normalised unethical behaviour becomes in our society, the more we compromise our universal ethical compass. But doing what’s normal and accepted is not the same as doing the right thing. Yet, by normalising unethical behaviour, the evidence tells us that we all become more capable of ‘cheating’ and by this, I mean, doing what is not right. Further still, ‘social contagion’ is a real thing, the phenomenon by which others’ behaviours become normalised and then adopted – this was clearly evident in the way so many people, in Australia, started mirroring the uber-competitiveness of Trump or the unkindness of former Prime-Minister Morrison.

This being the case, how do we build a personal ethical framework to guide us, to empower and enable us to make sound ethical choices? It is possible, but it is through the lens of a profoundly personal truth that requires tremendous courage and honesty and self-knowledge.

How Can We Use Guiding Principles to Make Ethical Choices?

The starting point is to have a sense of the lenses that help us perceive ethical dimensions. In a world of competing values, having a language to organise our thoughts is critical.

There are six, fairly well established lenses, for considering our ethical challenges and these lenses can bring new insights. To use these lenses, I lean into particular dilemmas (the more highly charged, the better), and consider the issue through these six lenses. This practice alone is usually sufficient to generate new thoughts, observations and insights and is a great investment – it is how we start to refine our ethical compass.

The Rights Lens: The ethical action is the one that best protects and respects the rights of those affected. This approach starts from the belief that humans have a dignity based on their human nature or on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives

The Justice Lens: The idea that each person should be given their due, that is, fair and equal treatment

The Utilitarian (consequentialist) Lens: Asking: How will this action impact everyone affected? Emphasises the consequences of actions - a results-based approach where the ethical action is the one that produces the greatest balance of good over harm for as many stakeholders as possible

The Common Good Lens: Here, we see life in community as a good in itself and our actions should contribute to that life - respect and compassion for all is required. Unlike the utilitarian lens, this lens highlights mutual concern for the shared interests of all members of a community

The Virtue Lens: Argues that ethical actions ought to be consistent with certain ideal virtues that provide for the full development of our humanity. Asks: What kind of person will I become if I do this? and Is this action consistent with my best self?

The Care Lens: Rooted in the need to listen and respond to individuals in their specific circumstances, rather than follow rules or calculating utility. Holds that we must account for the relationships, concerns and feelings of all stakeholders

Going a step further, I reconsider my dilemma by plugging into the frameworks below. While this practice does not always bring the clarity I hope for, it can give some greater rationale to the options being considered. (Adapted from: A Framework for Making Ethical Decisions from Brown University)

| | Consequentialist (End results, Utilitarian/Telos) | Duty (Deontological, Categorical Imperatives) | Virtue (Character focused) |
|-------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Deliberative process | What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)? Ends justifies the means | What are my obligations in this situation and what are the things I should never do? | What kind of person should I be or try to be? What will my actions show about my character? |
| Focus | Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action | Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligation – belief in universal rights and wrongs | Attempts to discern character traits (virtues and vices) – virtuous character does virtuous things – in doing ‘x’ I display ‘y’ virtue |
| Definition of Ethical Conduct | Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences / ends (or seeks to) | Ethical conduct involves always doing the right thing, that is, those actions performed out of duty to universal principles | Ethical conduct is whatever a fully virtuous person would do in the circumstances |
| Motivation | Aim is to produce the most good (worthy outcomes) for the maximum number | Aim is to perform the right action - good actions are ones performed out of duty | Aim is to develop one’s character (moral excellence). The means justifies the ends |

What Ought We Do?

Taking guidance from the St. James Ethics Centre, a helpful way to consider ethical dilemmas might be to reflect on your view of human nature, that is, deciding what we ought to do may depend on your perception of human nature, as follows:

What is the optimal balance of:

- freedom V. control
- trust V. risk management

If perceive:

- We are bad, then more control, through governance and regulation, is required
- We are hapless, then more risk management is needed
- We are good, then more trust and freedom is called for, that is, controlled opportunities (risk management) to grow and make right choices



Even still, we may not gain the clarity we are after in the dilemmas we face. We are often called to select between values that are equally important to us. How do we then set our own compass? And, what choices we are faced with today; whether is it organisations dealing with mandatory vaccinations versus employee rights to make choices for themselves; an individual complying with health orders versus resigning from a role which they love; self-determination or autonomy and personal agency versus community needs and the protection of the vulnerable; how do we decide between a clash of our own values, between options that may conflict with very different values we hold dear? What is the right thing to do? Where does our responsibility lie?

Therein lies the nature of ethical decision making; there are no hard and fast rules but rather questions and prompts to give us pause and help us look at situations differently. By simply asking ourselves: What ought I do and striving to do the right thing we are operating in the realm of ethics, with all its inherent ambiguity and uncertainty. And amplifying the confusion is the fact that any decision we make carries with it real consequences for ourselves and often, for many others. While not terribly comforting, tough ethical choices need to be 'owned', not 'liked' and making choices requires acceptance of responsibility, the ownership of the outcomes without blaming others. Here-in is the deeper conflict; in a time when people believe they ought to be able to feel never-ending happiness, there appears, to me at least, that people expect to never feel unhappiness, or even the travails of life; that this ought to be met with anger.

When making tough ethical decisions, it helps me to reflect on:

Freedom is not the same thing as the power or right to do whatever I want

A simpler answer to the question, 'How do I make ethical decisions?' may, perhaps be: The right decision is the one which strives to do the right thing. It is in considering, deliberating, reflecting, the commitment to doing the right thing that we arrive at 'a' right decision. In this way, ethics is at the heart of our own commitment to be leaders in our own lives - It is not about doing things right, it is about the struggle to do the right things. In the many conversations I have had in exploring this, I keep arriving at the thought that 'wisdom' may be the ability to consider the impact of our decisions and actions on all parties. What I mean is that I don't know that wisdom is about getting it right but rather the deliberation, the struggle to do the right thing, the reflection on the impacts on all parties impacted by our decisions and our actions.

Really! How Do I Make Ethical Decisions?

It simply doesn't work to prescribe a formula for ethical decisions – it is like the scene in *Dead Poets Society* where the Robyn Williams character gets the students to rip out the part of their textbooks where the author has reduced poetry to a formula. Ethics, like all things that are essential, do not work that way. Ethical decisions require a trained sensitivity to ethical issues, practiced reflection, exploring ethical aspects, weighing considerations and impacts, discussion and dialogue with others and genuinely gathering different perspectives, perspectives that are unlike your own. If this is true, then too much attention on rules probably hinders the development of moral character because there is insufficient attention given to the right questions to ask of ourselves.

Of course, if people do not know themselves, if their lives are unexamined, then the inputs into their decisions will be unreliable and this will inevitably result in faulty conclusions. To mitigate such outcomes, I suggest questions which demand of you deep reflection and self-examination, that facilitate moments of pause, so that we bypass our cognitive blind-spots and unconscious bias. In this sense, we use questions, lenses and frameworks not to get a clear answer but to help us press pause and reflect, to truly consider 'what ought we do', to respond deliberately to our challenges rather than react blindly as a passenger to the norms and perversions of our times.

A practical tool for exploring ethical dilemmas and identifying ethical courses of action may look like the one presented in the text box below. (Adapted from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University).

Identify the ethical issues – Could this be unevenly beneficial or damaging to someone or some group? / Does this decision involve a choice between good and bad alternatives? / Is this about more than what's legal or most efficient? If so, how?

Get all the facts you can and identify options

Evaluate alternative actions by asking the following questions:

- Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Lens)
- Which option treats people fairly, giving them each what they are due? (The Justice Lens)
- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm for as many stakeholders as possible? (The Utilitarian Lens)
- Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Lens)
- Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (The Virtue Lens)
- Which option appropriately takes into account the relationships, concerns, and feelings of all stakeholders? (The Care Ethics Lens)

Choose an option for action and test it - If I told someone I respect (or public audience) which option I have chosen, what would they say? If it was to become public, how would I feel and how would it be reported?

Implement the decision and reflect on outcomes - How did it turn out? / Conduct follow-up / Could there have been a better outcome and if so, how?

Socrates Model: What ought one do?

What should you do – hard and soft laws

What must you do – non-negotiables

What might you do – wonderings

What could you do – options

What will you do – action

Alternatively, or concurrently, one might apply the lens (at left), which I first encountered while studying at the St James Ethics Centre.

On the following page, I have adapted the St James Ethics Centre Holistic Framework and find it a valuable tool to better understand one's personal decision making drivers.

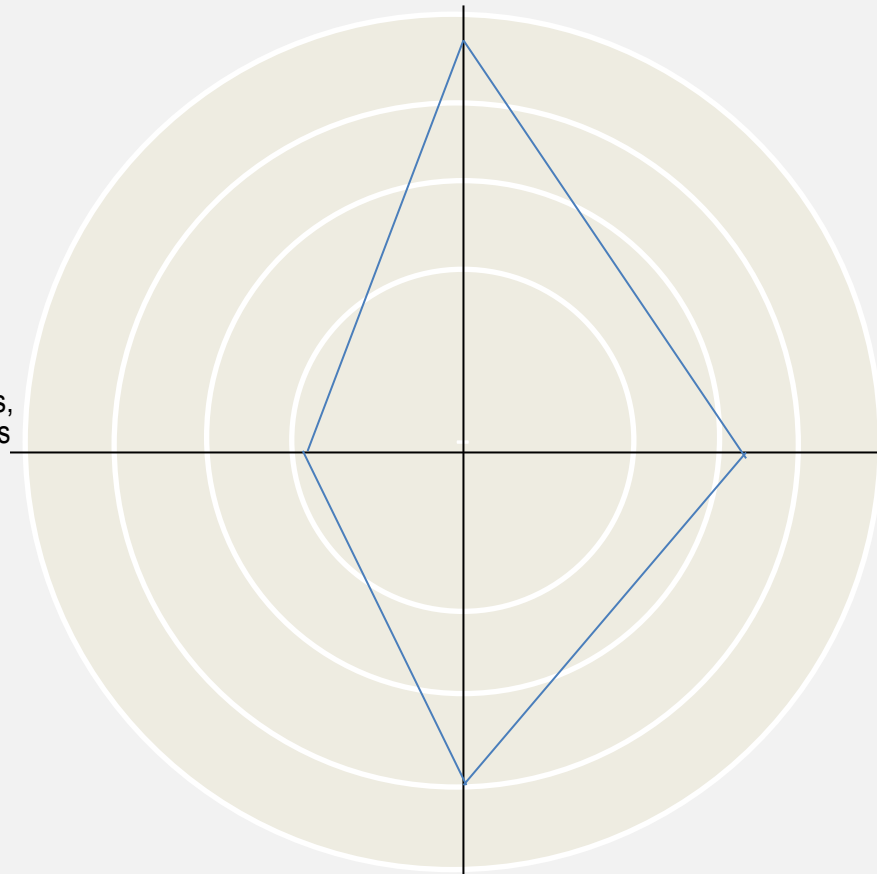
St James Ethics Centre Holistic Framework

How far into each quadrant do you personally land? Where do you personally land? Where do you cross the axis in each of the four quadrants? What takes precedence for you and should it? What is most important to you and does this make sense to you or does it need recalibration?

Reflect on your shape and if this reflects who you are as an individual. Consider what your shape means for you: Do you need to give greater attention to one area or perhaps less to another? Does this mean that you are experiencing inertia or anxiety about the decisions you need to make? Does something need to change?

The graph to the right, represents my shape when completing this exercise

Body - codes, laws, regulations, policies – this is about **documenting** our ethics



Spirit – primary purpose and contribution to society – this is about our **contribution** and commitment to creating a better world

Heart - competing stakeholders and relationships - this is about **relating** and the quality of our relationships

Mind - ethical dilemmas and decision making models - our thinking and **reflecting** to inform actions

O'Toole's Executive Compass

A useful tool for critically reflecting on our work and the organisations we are part of is O'Toole's Executive Compass.

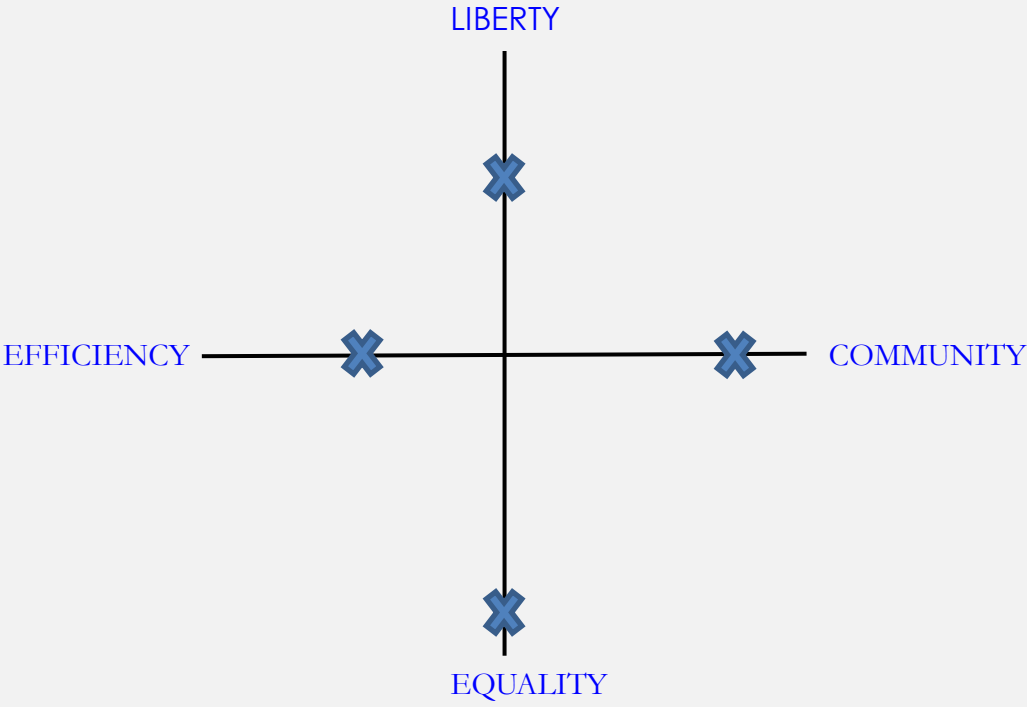
Ask yourself: Where does our organisation cross each axis? Where would we place our organisation in each of these four domains and does this feel right to us? Where do we place our energy and efforts and what considerations drive our organisation? What is important to us and does this need to be reconsidered?

Give your organisation a score between 0 and 10 in each axis.

When I did this recently, the scores I arrived at were as follows:

- 5 for efficiency
- 9 for equality (for me this was more about equity or justice)
- 8 for community
- 6 for liberty

This is a lovely exercise to do with your colleagues, to reflect on what drives you and whether this needs to be reconsidered.



Beyond Ethical Frameworks

As a starting point, as a benchmark, it would seem we should consider some basic principles, including:

- The recognition of the essential dignity of each and every person
- The active concern for the wellbeing of the community and the environment
- The cultivation of a safe place where people can bring their best selves and thrive (and whether this confers on us a duty to comply with laws and with rules)

Likewise, I would argue there are some universal moral values, including: Respect, Trustworthiness (honesty); Responsibility (diligence); Fairness; Caring; Citizenship and; Compassion.

Are these principles and values non-negotiables? Well, they are in my mind but when these compete, which ought to take priority? What of other domains that are seemingly in conflict, perhaps conflict between:

- Individual V. community
- Truth V. loyalty
- Short-term V. long-term
- Justice V. mercy

And what of 'peace'. Peace is a domain that gets so little attention in today's volatile, competitive and aggressive world and by peace I mean what Dr King said: Peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice. This carries great weight and ought to guide what we do. The lens of justice has the ability to drive such powerful action and to create such reconciliation in our societies and within our own beings for it is the absence of justice that is behind so much violence. If only we could pivot our debates and our public policy to a consideration of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

To go beyond ethical frameworks may be to arrive where we were a little earlier: How one makes ethical decisions could be to strive to do the right thing, that perhaps the right decision is the one which seeks to do right; that when you pause and reflect, when you consider values and principles and the inherent conflicts between important priorities, it may be that a deep commitment and deliberative process to doing what is good and right, is the best we can do. We won't always get the outcome we wanted or hoped for but it may be the best decision we can make.

Know Your Values

For me, making ethical decisions starts with understanding, deep down inside, what is important to you; what you want your life to stand for. Likewise, there appears to be great merit in considering what qualities you want to cultivate as a person and; how you want to be in relationship with others.

Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, to other people and, to ourselves – they guide us as we move through life. Values are not the same as goals and the great thing about values is that they can be lived and cultivated each day, irrespective of goals. I have written previously, that a source of great anxiety and struggle, stems from the fact that so many of us are living goal directed lives rather than values congruent lives. For this reason, a technique for making ethical decisions is to de-couple our choices and behaviour from targets or goals and instead link decisions and action to our values - this leads us to authentic happiness while goal directed lives are associated with disappointment or anxiety.

Below are some common values and it is worth spending time considering which are the 6 or so which are most important to you. This technique, shown to me by Russell Harris, a wonderful practitioner and teacher of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), asks you to write a letter next to each value, based on how important it is to you: V = very important, Q = quite important, and N = not important. It is the act of identifying and reflecting on our values and what they inform about the actions we should take that is empowering and enabling when trying to make ethical decisions.

| | |
|--|--|
| Acceptance: self, others, life etc. | Forgiveness: self, others |
| Adventure: to be adventurous | Fun & humour: create, engage fun activities |
| Assertiveness: stand up for my rights | Gratitude: appreciative of self, others, life |
| Authenticity: to be genuine, and real | Honesty: truthful, sincere with self others |
| Caring: self, others, environment, etc | Industrious: hardworking, dedicated |
| Compassion: self and others | Intimacy: open up, reveal, share |
| Connection: engage fully and be present | Kindness: considerate, nurturing, self/other |
| Contribution & generosity: to give, share | Love: towards self, other |
| Cooperation: collaborative with others | Mindfulness: engage in present moment |
| Courage: to be brave; to persist | Order: to be orderly and organised |
| Creativity: to be innovative | Persistence & commitment: resolute |
| Curiosity: open-minded, interested, explore | Respect: self, others |
| Encouragement: self and others | Responsibility: accountable for my actions |
| Excitement: engage in stimulating things | Safety & protection: own &/or others |
| Fairness & justice: self, others | Sensuality & pleasure: enjoy pleasure |
| Fitness: look after my health | Sexuality: to explore or express sexuality |
| Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily | Skilfulness: practice, improve, apply skills |
| Freedom & independence: choices for life | Supportiveness: helpful, available self/other |
| Friendliness: companionable, agreeable | Trust: to be trustworthy, loyal, faithful |

Building on this, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy uses a technique known as the Life Compass, a lovely exercise, where you write within 10 boxes which contain the following life domains:

- Spirituality
- Personal Growth
- Leisure
- Work
- Health
- Community
- Social Relationships
- Environment
- Family Relationships / Parenting
- Intimate Relationships

To undertake the exercise, place each life domain inside a large box and in each box, simply write:

- What is important or meaningful to you in that domain?
- What sort of person do you want to be with respect to this area?
- What sort of personal strengths and qualities do you want to cultivate in this area?
- What do you want to stand for within this domain?
- How do you ideally want to behave with respect to this domain?

If a box seems irrelevant to you, that's okay: just leave it blank and if the same words appear in several or all boxes then this helps you identify core values that cut through many parts of your life. Next and within each box, mark a score between 0-10, how important this domain is to you, at this point in your life, using the following scale: 0 = no importance to 10 = extremely important. (It's okay if several squares all have the same score.) Finally, mark inside each box, a score between 0-10, how effectively you are living right now by what you have written, using the following scale: 0 = not at all to 10 = living by those words fully. (Again, it's okay if several squares all have the same score).

Once you have completed the exercise, consider what this tells you about: a) What is important in your life? b) What you are currently neglecting? Are you living a values congruent life or are you behaving inconsistently with your values?

The brilliant psychologist, Susan David, writes that our values bring us freedom from social comparison and that people with a clear sense of their values are proven to be more resilient to the pressures of their community, that values inoculate us against making decisions that are not our own. David encourages us to remind ourselves of our values each day and writes that the act of articulating our values is not only a step toward self-knowledge, it is a profound act of self-care.

Lead with Purpose

While it sounds simplistic, what I have seen work, time and time again, is to make decisions through the lens of 'Purpose' This requires a profound understanding of your values and it requires fierce honesty (as opposed to the dominant paradigm today of self-denial and self-deception). As Bob Dylan said, and I think this goes to the heart of making ethical decisions: To live outside the law, one must be honest. This maxim is so difficult, as Orwell understood and articulated so eloquently: In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.

What's clear to me, is that living beyond the law is a lonely place, a place where one is marginalised and often ostracised; but that the reward is the path to a sense of 'self', a 'comfortableness' when making ethical decisions. This is what the Stoics knew, that through courage and tolerance, or endurance of the hardships and madness of the times we find ourselves in, is the path to character, the development of our 'self' and a feeling of being true and authentic.

Our deepest urge as humans is to feel that we matter, that we have a Purpose, that what we do makes a difference. So our Purpose, whether we are talking about our personal cause or mission or our organisational Purpose, ought to be the lens through which we make decisions, the beacon to orient us and navigate challenges, the filter to shift through competing alternatives, the blow-torch to shine a bright light on the decisions we need to make.

What I have seen, is that people and organisations that live their Purpose make better decisions, perform at a higher level and experience much greater wellbeing. In fact, Purpose or mission driven individuals, teams and societies do better because Purpose creates meaning, creates coherences in our world and helps us to make sense of complexity. In this way, our Purpose is the mother of all lenses and creates tremendous power to drive the right decisions and the right actions.

This is not some 'touchy-feely' theory - it is perhaps the most validated strategy available to anyone or any organisation to lift the quality of their decision making and to achieve better outcomes and I have worked with many organisations which, after defining their Purpose, were able to settle on a course of action which had stumped them for months and in some cases, years.

The power of Purpose is that it helps us make sense of the world and helps make the path forward much clearer.

It is the act of considering what your cause is, what you're on this planet to do, what unifies all the parts of you that helps us make ethical decisions - decisions and action now become about aligning to your Purpose.



To define and test our Purpose, I take individuals and organisations through a series of prompts and questions, some of which are set out in the table on the following page:

Define Our Purpose:

1. Why would stakeholders want to engage with you, what do you do that they benefit from?
2. Why do you matter?
3. What is it, that if you did not do it, there would be a gap in the world around you (a gap in your family, the market, in the community, in society and so on)?
4. How do you create value in society?
5. What unifies all the parts of you?

Test Our Purpose:

1. Will your Purpose drive behaviours you would be happy with?
2. Does the Purpose set your direction for the next 5-20years and beyond?
3. Is the Purpose what you believe about yourself?
4. Does your Purpose define a clear image of the future?
5. Will the Purpose engage all stakeholders and create meaningful relationships with them?

Watergate – A Watershed in the History of Ethics

Of the Watergate scandal, Nixon said something like, 'It is not a lie, if the President says it.' Maybe he's right and maybe there are no moral absolutes. And, maybe ethics requires each person to determine for themselves what they can live with. But I do know that cheating has a corrosive effect on society. And there is not doubt that Nixon's behaviour, in many ways, represented the end of American innocence. Until that time, the American people believed in the righteousness of their actions. Nixon's behaviour ushered in, not only a tolerance for, but perhaps even an expectation of morally dubious behaviour – and we can all fall victim to ethical violation.

In the years since Watergate, our culture has descended to a point where not only is it difficult to do the right thing, it is almost impossible to know what the right thing is, cast adrift, as we are, in a amoral world without a universally agreed compass.

The antidote is not more codes and rules and regulations but moments of pause and reflection, of questions and deliberations that prompt different thoughts. What we need is cognitive dissonance to arrest us and have us reconsider and challenge dominant ideology, cultural norms and decision expediency. This used to be the role of art. This used to be the role of philosophy.

The film maker, Alejandro Jodorowsky said:

What is the goal of a life? It is to create yourself a soul.

My contention is that ethical decision making is possible: A daily check in with our Purpose and values provides great guidance. But it is more than that. What is required is that we reflect on our Purpose, disseminate it broadly and talk to others about it. Have others challenge it and challenge us. More than anything, it is to constantly evaluate our actions against our Purpose and ask: Am I living my Purpose and are my decisions and actions congruent with it: Does my Purpose stand-up as a living declaration of my best self?

It is my genuine hope that this paper contributes to our mission of building purpose driven organisations and helping all people and organisations to build their capacity – helping everyone to be their best is what drives us.

I encourage you to contact me if you would like to discuss anything in this paper.

Sincerely,



Dom Meli

Principal

People At Their Best

0415 927 898

Shop 5 /1 Broughton Street Parramatta 2150, NSW, Australia

dom@peopleattheirbest.com.au

www.peopleattheirbest.com.au

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