



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Ethical Dilemma Reflection Framework

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Opportunities to practice with ethical dilemmas and reflect in community can empower individuals to navigate critical incidents with a moral compass and develop ‘ethical fitness’ (Kidder, 2009). But fitness can be fleeting and much like character, building and maintaining ethical fitness requires active engagement along with opportunities for habituation (Kidder, 2009). Practicing with and responding to authentic dilemmas through a structured reflective framework may help students across a variety of professions to engage in collective *phronesis*, make sense of complexity, make ethically defensible decisions, and choose the intelligent and virtuous response to moral dilemmas.

Aristotle’s comments regarding the “many” suggest that groups of individuals often come to better, collectively wiser decisions than individuals. He implies that such groups are less corruptible and less likely to fall prey to negative passions or vices (Kristjánsson *et al.*, 2021). The concept of collective *phronesis* may have significant implications for institutions preparing professionals for the current climate of joint decision-making.

The following four-phase ethical dilemma reflection framework is designed to cultivate the capacity for character-based decision making. While originally created for use with teams of aspiring school leaders, this framework could easily be adapted for use with students preparing for various professional roles.

Phase I – Be Present - *Name and strive to understand the situation & perspectives applicable to the situation – ethic of critique* (Starratt, 1994; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

- Share initial reactions.
- Formulate questions.
- What professional codes of ethics, school rules and/or policies need to be consulted?
- What virtues are relevant to the dilemma?
- Are different virtues in conflict, and if so, which should be prioritized in this situation? Why?
- List all possible stakeholders.

Dewey (1933) wrote about essential attitudes he felt were necessary for reflective thinking and pointed to the element of directness or presence. He stated that “it denotes . . . unconscious faith in the possibilities of the situation. It signifies rising to the needs of the situation” (p. 181). Carol Rodgers (2002, 2020) explained that being present in the act of reflection implies slowing down the process to allow the unfolding of rich and complex details.

Phase I reflection activities include identifying various stakeholders and generating questions (Kidder, 2009; Freeman, 1998; Warnick & Silverman, 2011; Campbell, 2018). In this first step, participants identify what they see as the moral issue, make note of initial reactions, generate a list of those impacted by the dilemma, and record any lingering questions. In addition, professional codes of ethics, rules and policies may need to be consulted (Freeman, 1998; Rodgers, 2002 & 2020; Warnick & Silverman, 2011).

Phase II – Frame & Reframe - *Keep the focus of the process on the people and their best interests – ethic of care* (Starratt, 1994; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

- Examine the emotions, interests, relationships, and perspectives of all stakeholders.
- Explore the values, virtues, and/or beliefs that may impact various stakeholder perceptions.
- Identify and focus on what’s essential, ignore the noise,
- Recognize and name biases.
- Determine player(s) that own the moral issue (s).

Framing the dilemma within the specific context can help individuals to define the problem. Stepping back and reframing provides the opportunity to re-examine the issues at hand through a different lens. Bolman and Deal (2017) posit that no one frame applies to every circumstance and suggest that framing and reframing prevents one from viewing situations from a singular viewpoint.

Gehlbach (2004) and Drago-Severson (2012) posit that perspective taking allows the individual to understand how the situation appears to another person. Freeman (1998) and

Campbell (2018) point to the value of viewing dilemmas through the lens of the various stakeholders while Kidder (2009) notes the importance of identifying the actors. Perspective taking involves an examination of the interests held by various stakeholders and allows decision makers not only to develop empathy for different points of view but also to identify the issues that make each stakeholder care about the resolution (Freeman, 1998).

Phase III – Engage in Dialogue - Decide on actions that will maximize benefits for all while also respecting the rights of individuals – ethic of justice (Starratt, 1994; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

- What decision would the profession expect?
- What decision would the community expect?
- What is the right decision based on what is best for students?
- Identify Option A and Option B.
- Brainstorm creative alternatives, is there an Option C?
- Come to consensus and defend the final decision.

Phase III requires the decision makers to consider what messages might be delivered if Option A or B become the decided course of action. Exploring possibilities opens up the likelihood of uncovering a variety of acceptable paths to resolve a dilemma (Freeman, 1998). Brainstorming is one technique that facilitates the exploration of a variety of alternative actions (Freeman, 1998; Campbell, 2018). Another approach offered by Drago-Severson and Blum-Stefano (2018) is that of collegial inquiry. They posit that this practice engages participants and provides not only the opportunity to listen and learn from one's own and others' perspectives but may also lead to a creative course of action. McAndrews and Hansberry (2018) note that collegial dialogue not only provides an opportunity to flesh out skeletal ideas, but also to cultivate a shared investment in the decision.

Phase IV – Reflect on the Process

- Does your final decision differ from your initial reactions?
- How did your personal and professional ethics influence the final decision?
- What leadership style(s) would an ethical and moral leader need to call upon to deal with this dilemma?
- What leadership virtues and/or character strengths an ethical and moral leader need to call upon to deal with this dilemma?

Engaging in the exercise of ethical decision-making, however, does not cease with Phase III. The final task involves consciously and deliberately reviewing the decision-making process. Whole group debriefing allows participants to look back on the process, listen to other perspectives, and consider lessons learned.

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Appendix

Ethical Dilemma Reflection Framework – for Character-Based Decision-Making

Phase I – Be Present (name and strive to understand the situation & perspectives applicable to the situation – ethic of critique)

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- Formulate questions.
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Phase II – Frame & Reframe (keep the focus of the process on the people and their best interests – ethic of care)

- ✓ Examine the emotions, interests, relationships, and perspectives of all stakeholders.
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