

Unexpected Cost of Ethical Behavior

In pursuit of my college degrees, work at Fortune 500 companies, and memberships in professional organizations, I was directed and trained to ensure ethical compliance --- as it's a personal, organizational, and company responsibility. This training provided examples of unethical activities and many times required participants to analyze case studies. These sessions were good ethics training; however, nobody ever discussed with or prepared me for the personal cost of choosing to be ethical.

Anyone who encounters ethical dilemmas must make a choice whether to ignore, react, or report the violation(s). During these moments, those effected normally know whether their or others behavior is appropriate, the real test is usually related to individual interpretation.

Many individuals are taught about the importance of 'doing the right thing'. This personal behavioral choice is a reflection of an individual's morals, ethics, and character. Furthermore, each of these items is an important descriptor of who someone is or chooses to be.

My ethical considerations are based on a combination of my:

- Morals – instilled in me by my family in the way we lived: by going to church, taking care of family, and being a good person;
- Character – developed over my lifetime by the things I believed, did, and my actions along with my behaviors toward others;
- Ethical Beliefs – evolved from a combination of my moral and character development, but were also refined by societal exposures (e.g., laws, others' behaviors, business school, company policies, and professional organizations' behavioral standards).

A cliché often communicated is that it's easy to act appropriately while others are

watching; however, nobody ever told me that ethical behavior could have a burdensome cost (e.g., individually, professionally, morally, and spiritually).

This commonly used cliché drives an exploratory question:

Would an individual respond the same way if there is an opportunity to be unethical if others aren't watching?

Unfortunately, I've discovered – through direct experience – that this isn't always the case --- along with it also being difficult to behave ethically while others are watching.

This realization is interesting because in almost every company I've worked, there was a requirement to review, sign, and submit to a/an:

- 1) acknowledgement of the organization's ethical standards (e.g., policies, procedures, etc.);
- 2) agreement to follow the standards;
- 3) commitment to ensure that the company's assets (e.g., financial, human, information, etc.) are protected.

Frustratingly, I've encountered many instances that organizational standards were openly violated in these same organizations --- while being an affront to my morals, character, and ethics.

After refusing to be complicit with activities (e.g., misappropriated funds, misrepresented material facts, workplace harassment, etc.) I considered questionable, unethical, or simply against standards of human decency, I left organizations due to a lack of management support to address egregious ethical violations. My departure from these organizations was due to the executives being focused on financial or personal gains versus a commitment to an ethical culture.

Sadly, the lessons learned from these experiences was that it's often easier and less effort to be unethical than ethical. The rationale for this is that individuals who decide to address unethical activities must have strong moral courage,

because combatting ethical violations can be costly (e.g., personally, professionally, etc.).

Examples of the personal cost can be related to stress (e.g., physical or mental) while deciding whether or not to address ethical concerns. Another example is the retaliatory cost to an individual's career options, future pay, or the type(s) of work assigned, which can be even more costly if an executive – who is engaged in unethical activities – is within someone's management chain.

Oftentimes, individuals who engage in independent or collective unethical activities remain in organizations long after those who attempt to combat these breaches of trust leave rather than to be a party to fraud, theft, or other illegal activities.

Life is about cumulative moments and the choices made during challenging times help to define who an individual was, is, and will be.

Some might argue that there can be extenuating circumstances that may cause someone to not address unethical activities. This may be true, but individuals almost always have a choice related to their actions and must also live with the outcome of their decisions --- regardless of the reason(s) used to justify inaction.

While encountering ethical dilemmas, these moments made me really question: who am I; what do I believe; will I be true to the individual I claim to be? The answer to these questions wasn't in that which would be put at-risk by addressing unethical activities, but it was more in the cost to me and others if the ethical violations weren't identified and resolved.

There are times that someone is aware of unethical activities, but is afraid to get involved due to a risk of a personal cost. Notwithstanding, the more important consideration is about the number of individuals who might be negatively impacted if known unethical activities are allowed to continue unchallenged.

It's not always easy to be ethical, but it's much better than being a willing accomplice by being complicit to unethical activities --- even if someone decides not to get involved.

My tough decisions to combat unethical activities weren't done for financial gains, but were done to be true to my positive and ethical beliefs regardless of the potential consequences. These tough decisions reflect my position that character is built during challenging moments, cannot be measured by financial instruments, and is much more valuable than any unethical gains.

As for me, I still want to make money the old fashion way ... (honestly) earn it.

Additional information on workplace ethical dilemmas can be obtained in Mr. Young's solution-oriented book "[Ethical Opportunity Cost: It's a matter of choice](#)".