

## Ethics Training is Missing the Mark: Here's Why

Ethics is a topic that's often discussed by parents, schools, organizations, and employers. These discussions usually teach individuals about the importance of being ethical: what does it mean; why is it important; what are the costs of unethical activities? This subject matter must be taught; however, the toughest parts of being ethical are almost never discussed. That is... what are the emotional, physiological, and moral challenges that individuals who don't want to be complicit to unethical behavior experience?

Before exploring the affects of wanting to be ethical, the reason that ethics is important must be reviewed.

Ethics are behavioral standards that individuals, organizations, and societies apply and generally adhere to as acceptable. Without ethical standards, there can be numerous variables used to determine if something is right or wrong, good or bad. Notwithstanding these random variables, there are always individual considerations based on experiential learning; however, an individual's ethical standards are normally defined and developed by family, religious beliefs, friends, and societal practices. These standards provide common operating practices that are used to define the limits of acceptable behavior.

Generally, individuals know whether something is right or wrong. Although, there are times that ethical decisions will require additional consideration, input, or sometimes assistance to make the appropriate choice. The challenge – many times – is whenever a decision is within an unclear range or the biggest test is making a decision about whether to get involved to resolve a known ethical issue. During these times, individuals can experience an internal battle while attempting to make an ethical decision.

The internal impacts of making tough ethical choices can impact individuals:

- Emotionally – a feeling related to a particular situation, event, or consideration;

- Physiologically - a body's reaction to making a tough decision, which could be stress, anxiety, sweat, depression, etc.;
- Morally - a challenge to an individual's belief system weighed against the things an [individual believes to be true](#) --- but may be altered while making a tough decision.

These internal impacts are seldom (if ever) discussed during ethics training. This omission is unfortunate because an ability to process these intangible elements are important factors while individuals determine whether to be ethical during certain moments.

In a time that winning at almost any cost is more pervasive, there must be an increased focus given to educating individuals about the significance of internal processing in ethical decision making --- beyond the mental processing. Otherwise, a larger number of individuals are more likely to bend the limits of standards, rules, policies, or laws to receive an unfair or personal advantage.

After the [allegations of ball deflation](#) by the New England Patriots prior to Super Bowl XLIX, my nephew and I discussed the potential ethical issues. During our conversation, my nephew made a couple of points to support his argument: 1) the deflation was found in the first half, but didn't impact the game's outcome and 2) everyone cheats at some point. What?!?!

The rationale used in his positioning is troubling for several reasons:

- First, a determination of whether something is ethical should never be decided based on an outcome, but instead by an evaluation of a consideration, situation, or an event;
- Second, a choice to be unethical cannot be validated based on attempting to justify the behavior by rationalizing the actions or activities of another;
- Third, individuals must be accountable and responsible for their actions --- including complicit acceptance of wrongdoings by allowing known unethical behavior (by others) to continue unchallenged.

There is a cost to individuals, organizations, and societies if unethical activities aren't resolved in a timely manner. However, there are also costs to individuals' emotional, physiological, and moral health while making a choice whether to get involved with the prevention of unethical behavior.

Decisions individuals make cannot be necessarily managed by external factors; although, if ethical training helps individuals to understand and prepare for the internal factors that might be experienced while dealing with ethical dilemmas, then more individuals will be better prepared to handle the internal impacts that can be experienced while attempting to behave ethically.

*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"](#).*