

No Easy Answers

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Ethics on the job - cases and strategies, second edition

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reviewed by John Burch

As an expositional tool for students, this thoughtful publication hits the mark. For the ethics novice in particular, it equips the reader with some fundamental principles early on and then introduces a framework for using these principles to solve problems using the *Resolvedd strategy of ethical decision making*. In addition, it provides numerous cleverly designed and controversial case studies to ensure vigorous classroom debate or discussion. From a practical perspective, however, *Ethics on the Job*, doesn't quite fully bridge the gap between theory and practice (as the title suggests) and could perhaps benefit from an injection of a few real world problems actually solved using the strategy to demonstrate the complexity of practical decision making.

Broadly, the *Resolvedd strategy* outlined encourages decision makers to do the following (not necessarily in this order):

- Review the details of the case
- State the main ethical problem or conflict
- List the main possible solutions
- State the important and probable outcomes of each of the solutions
- Describe the likely impact of the main possible solutions on main players' lives
- Explain the values upheld and violated by each main solution
- Evaluate the main solutions
- Make a decision and justify it
- Defend the decision against objections to its main weaknesses

Whilst the strategy undoubtedly provides a useful framework for considering ethical problems, the ideas themselves are not new or unique. In addition, the difference between the *outcomes* and *likely impact* stages (points four and five above) is not altogether clear.

The central case study in the book of 'your subordinate' is *Resolved* using an analysis by some of the authors' students. In the central case study, it is suggested (by a supervisor) that you (a middle manager) take steps to 'motivate' a poor worker to seek employment elsewhere by moving him around more often among the least desirable jobs in the company.

The students' analysis of this case broadly concludes that the best solution would be to do the right thing by the worker by attempting to gently persuade the supervisor that his approach is unethical and then suggesting a suitable alternative that would give the worker an opportunity to lift his performance. Whilst in this case numerous caveats and provisos are provided to demonstrate that all bases have been covered, it is not difficult to imagine a circumstance where an ethically satisfactory resolution of this case study is impossible, or at least unlikely. The only other option discussed is to follow the supervisor's instructions, but because of their ethical repugnance, this is dismissed as unsatisfactory. It could be argued that this might, in actual fact, be the only viable option - particularly in a tight labour market.

Numerous case studies of personal ethical problems for analysis are provided at the end of the book. All of them are challenging and controversial, and will ensure hours of debate or discussion among students - don't expect many easy solutions.

Ethics on the Job might benefit from the inclusion of some real life instances where the *Resolved* strategy has worked effectively, of course with identities appropriately disguised. Reflecting the fact that solutions to problems are rarely clear-cut, this could perhaps include more discussion of instances where, because of practical considerations, one or more ethically proper solutions to a problem might need to be totally disregarded because of extenuating circumstances.

For instance, you witness serial pilfering of stock by a colleague. Whilst reporting that behaviour would be the ethical way to respond, it might also expose you to the colleague as the person responsible for reporting the incident. However, you know privately that the colleague has a history of violence. Do you uphold the principle of fidelity towards your company, and therefore put yourself in possible danger by reporting the crime, or do you keep it to yourself and hope that the colleague will be exposed another way?

For those already familiar with ethical principles, skipping the first two chapters of the book is recommended, as they are fairly heavy going.

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