5 simple questions on ethics

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We don't need to look very far to find examples of people making "ethical mistakes" - decisions with moral implications they later regret and wish they could go back and change.

The front page of every newspaper is replete with stories of ethical breaches in the public and private sectors and in social organizations. What almost all these stories have in common is that one or more individuals have ruined their lives or careers by doing something that, for most, is out of character.

Why do we make these errors in judgment? Mainly because we fail to clearly think through the longer-term implications of our decisions or actions.

What can someone do to avoid these kinds of mistakes? One way is to develop the habit of asking a few critical questions so we can better understand their ethical implications. In working with both individuals and organizations, I have found five simple questions to be particularly helpful:

In this situation, what would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number?

How can I serve my own best self-interest without violating either the law or what is socially acceptable behavior?

Do any specific policies, rules or laws apply in this situation?

How would I judge this decision from the perspective of my deathbed?

In my position or role, what are my obligations to others in this situation?

Each of these questions examines the issue from a different perspective. The answers help explore what principles might be affected by your decision.

Suppose someone whom you manage asks for an exception to a rule or policy. Not all five questions are equally important in this situation, but numbers 1, 3 and 5 are useful in analyzing the issue.

Would making an exception benefit the majority, or only for that individual? Should I ignore the rules in this situation and, if so, should I do it for others in the future? And what are my obligations to those who don't ask for an exception? Are they just out of luck because they didn't ask?

While none of these questions provides the definitive answer, each makes you think about the consequences of your actions and may help you avoid a mistake you would later regret. Those are questions worth asking.
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