

Introduction to Business Ethics

Is it possible for an individual with strong moral values to make ethically questionable decisions in a business setting? What affects a person's inclination to make either ethical or unethical decisions in a business organization? Although the answers to that question are not entirely clear, there appear to be three general sets of factors that influence the standards of behavior in an organization; individual factors, social factors and opportunity.

Several individual factors influence the level of ethical behavior in an organization. An individual's knowledge level regarding an issue can help to determine ethical behavior. A decision maker with a greater amount of knowledge regarding an object or situation may take steps to avoid ethical problems, whereas a less-informed person may unknowingly take action that leads to an ethical conflict. One's moral values and central, value-related attitudes clearly influence his or her business behavior. Most people join organizations to accomplish personal goals. The types of personal goals an individual aspires to and the manner in which these goals are pursued have significant impact on that individual's behavior in an organization.

A person's behavior in the workplace is, to some degree, determined by cultural norms, and these social factors vary from one culture to another. For example, in some countries it is acceptable and ethical for customs agents to receive gratuities for performing ordinary, legal tasks that are a part of jobs, whereas in other countries these practices would be viewed as unethical and perhaps illegal. The actions and decisions of coworkers is another social factor believed to shape a person's sense of business ethics. For example, if your coworkers make long-distance telephone calls on company time and at company expense, you might view that behavior as acceptable and ethical because everyone does it. Significant others are persons to whom someone is emotionally attached-spouses, friends, and relatives, for instance. Their moral values and attitudes can also affect an employee's perception of what is ethical and unethical in the workplace.

Opportunity refers to the amount of freedom an organization gives an employee to behave ethically if he or she makes that choice. In some organizations, certain company policies and procedures reduce the opportunity to be unethical. For example, at some fast-food restaurants, one person takes your order and receives your payment and another person fills the order. This procedure reduces the opportunity to be unethical because the person handling the money is not dispensing the product, and the person giving out the product is not handling the money. The existence of an ethical code and the importance management places on this code are other determinants of opportunity. The degree of enforcement of company policies, procedures, and ethical codes is a major force affecting opportunity. When violations are dealt with consistently and firmly, the opportunity to be unethical is reduced.

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