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12 Questions for Ethical Business Decisions

In our last issue, we looked at some basic Do's and Don'ts that we should follow in the business world and how we should treat other people. We learned that we should treat others with respect, have integrity, and treat others fairly. We also learned that we shouldn't steal, lie, gossip, or harm others. What do we do, however, when you're facing a business decision and not a person?

This month, we're going to look at 12 questions to ask when examining the ethics of a business decision. These 12 questions are from the steps formulated by Harvard Business School Professor Laura Nash in her Harvard Business Review article, "Ethics without the Sermon" (1981). As we look at these questions, imagine that you're Sophia and are trying to make the following choice.

Sophia must make a decision about taking printer paper home with her, even though her company has a policy against taking any type of office supplies home.

1. Have you defined the problem accurately?

My problem is that I don't have enough money to buy printer paper for my home printer. I often work at home, and I feel that I should be able to use paper from the office when I need to print work at home.

2. How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?

The company has this policy in place for a purpose. If other employees knew that I took home paper, they may want to do it as well. This would cost the company money on paper that people aren't using at the office.

3. How did this situation occur in the first place?

I'm now working more and more from home to be closer to my family. Often, the projects I'm working on require that I print copies.

4. To whom and to what do you give your loyalty as a person and as a member of the organization?

I am loyal to my company.

5. What is your intention in making this decision?

My intention is to only use the paper for work purposes. I intend to have other paper available for personal use.

6. How does this intention compare with the probable results?

It is probable that over time, I will stop buying paper to use when I print things for personal use. My intention may also be perceived as not showing respect for my company's policies.

7. Whom could your decision or action injure?

This decision could impact any company and myself. My company could lose money from the amount of paper that would go home. If I'm caught, I could lose the respect of my boss and coworkers and may even be fired.

8. Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties before you make your decision?

Yes. I can talk with my boss to ask permission to take paper home to use for work purposes. Since he knows

*Initiative consists of doing the right thing
without being told.
Irving Mack*

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that I'm working more from home, he may make an exception.

9. Are you confident that your position will be as valid over a long period of time as it seems now?

No, I am not. If my work situation changes, I may no longer be able to work from home. If I am promoted, I may have to enforce this rule. This would be difficult to do if I've broken it myself.

10. Could you disclose without qualm your decision or action to your boss, your CEO, the board of directors, your family, society as a whole?

No. I would not feel comfortable taking the paper home and telling my boss after the fact.

11. What is the symbolic potential of your action if understood? If misunderstood?

People may question my loyalty to the company and my respect for company policies.

12. Under what conditions would you allow exceptions to your stand?

An exception might be OK if I ask permission first. If I am not given permission, I can work with my supervisor to find a way to get my work done without having the paper at home.

Adapted from Beginning Human Relations by Laura Portolese Dias

Sophia came to her own conclusion by answering the questions involved in this model. The purpose of the model is to think through the situation from all sides to make sure the right decision is being made.

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