

Introduction

Most people want to act ethically. Ethics is about morality: it concerns right or wrong, and better or worse. If you are reading this document, you probably care about doing right, and about acting honorably. (If not, then reading further is probably a waste of your time.) This tool is designed to help you apply that commitment to your actions.

Many ethical decisions are easy: we can discern right from wrong, and can select the best available course of action. Other times, though, reasonable people disagree about the right course of action. Theorists over centuries have forged fine tools for making ethical decisions, but because real life can be complicated, even excellent tools have limitations. This ELA Quick Reference Guide combines a basic **Decision Framework** with a **Concept Model**, drawing from multiple ethical theories. We intend it to be brief and memorable. We hope that it helps you consider what to do, especially when making ethical decisions as a group.

Decision Framework

The following process can reveal the moral dimensions of our choices, helping us select the best available action.

1. **What decision are we making?** Define the issue or problem. Be concise and precise.
2. **What are our options?** Define each option clearly and carefully.
3. **What is the challenge?** For each option, what are the advantages? Drawbacks? What rules, principles, or values are involved? Why do they matter? Clarify terms: just doing that may provide a clear answer.
4. **What do we know?** Would additional data or information clarify the situation? Gather it.
5. **What should we do?** Compare options using the agreed-upon values of your group, along with the *ROAM* considerations below. Determine which options are acceptable, and which is the best available.

Move freely up and down the framework: by considering challenges or information needs, you may generate new options. Seek new possibilities; don't feel locked into your original view of the situation.

Concept Model: *ROAM*

Consider all of the following when choosing between available actions, and when thinking about new options.

Rights: Might any of the proposed actions violate anyone's rights? Do they violate the terms of an existing agreement? Consider the basis for any rights in question, and the corresponding duties imposed by those rights.

Outcomes: What is the probable impact of each option on everyone it would touch? You must consider all persons equally when making outcome-based ethical judgments. Seek the greatest net benefit (or least harm).

Actors: What would a proposed action say about your character, or about the values and principles of your group? How would someone you truly admire act in this situation, and why? In many ways, we *are* what we *do*.

Motives: What motivates your choice? Would it be rational to permit everyone in your situation to act as you propose? Do actions demonstrate respect for all persons, or do they exploit others, solely as means to your ends?

Conclusion

The ELA approach to ethical decision making rests on a foundation of excellent work by classical, modern, and contemporary thinkers. As important, these tools are informed by our experience with leaders in multiple contexts, facing an expanding array of challenges. We welcome comments through our Website, below.