

Critical Incident: Ethics Across Cultures

“I don’t know how we can compete,” Jenny, a vice president at a large aircraft manufacturer, said to Eric. “The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) has so many holes in it that there’s not an even playing field out there.” “Yeah, tell me about it,” Eric said. “Even though getting caught violating the act can cost a company big time, I bet only one percent of violators gets caught.” “I remember a few years ago when one of our competitors got caught paying \$1.5 million to an Egyptian official who was instrumental in helping them get an airline contract,” Jenny stated. “Even though they were fined \$24 million, how many times have they, or some other competitor, cheated?” “Do you think it’s worth it?” Eric asked Jenny. “There’re a lot of places around the world where bribes are business as usual, and if we aren’t willing to play their game, we aren’t going to be competitive. We’d be doing our shareholders and passengers a favor.”

CRITICAL INCIDENT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What types of considerations should Jenny and Eric contemplate as they think about the advantages and disadvantages of bribing officials to gain contracts?
2. What should Jenny and Eric’s employer do to ensure that the company continues to be competitive while remaining ethical?

Exercise 9: Four Contrasting Ethical Orientations

OBJECTIVE

To better understand your own culturally learned patterns of determining what is right and what is wrong

DESCRIPTION

The four classical positions of judgments in ethical thinking are “Consequentialists,” who judge according to consequences; “Intentionalists,” who judge according to the person’s intention; “Absolutists,” who judge according to a set of absolute standards; and “Relativists,” who judge the person in context. The following 24-item rating sheet will help participants better understand the extent to which they follow one or another of these positions.

Time required: About an hour

Risk/expertise level: Moderate

Participants needed: Any number of participants plus one facilitator

PROCEDURE

1. The facilitator will distribute the 24-item rating sheet below to each participant.
2. The facilitator will ask each participant to rate his or her reaction to each item as indicated.
3. When the participants have completed their ratings, they will be asked to compute their score as indicated.
4. The facilitator will post all the scores to determine which ethical tradition is most popular and which is least popular among the participants.
5. The facilitator will then organize a general discussion.

DEBRIEFING

If you were surprised by your ethical position, you may want to go back and examine the items themselves to make sure you scored each item correctly. You may want to discuss in dyads or small groups the similarities and differences in your ethical position compared to the ethical positions of others. There are no right or wrong ethical positions among the four indicated above; however, it is important that you be intentional in deliberately defining your position if you expect to “do the right thing.” Some discussion questions are given below:

1. What are the good and bad consequences of following each of the four traditions?
2. Are you comfortable with your own preferred style of ethical thinking?
3. Are you able to work with others who may believe in a different tradition than yours?
4. Would you be able to change your own style of ethical thinking?
5. Which countries or cultures do you associate with each of these classical traditions?

INSIGHT

There is more than one way of deciding what is right and wrong across cultures.

EXHIBIT

The facilitator will ask that participants respond to the following statements by indicating whether they agree very much, somewhat, very little, are uncertain, disagree very little, somewhat, or very much.

1 = disagree very much	5 = agree very little
2 = disagree somewhat	6 = agree somewhat
3 = disagree very little	7 = agree very much
4 = uncertain	

1. Actions are judged according to their good or bad consequences.
2. There is an appropriate behavior for every situation.
3. Some decisions must be in the best interest of the group at the expense of the individual.
4. The consequences of rules and regulations will change from one situation to another.
5. Decisions are made by balancing good and bad consequences.
6. Public leaders make decisions according to the consequences of their actions.
7. There are basic moral principles to guide us in all our decisions.
8. It is essential to know a person's good or bad intention to judge that person's behavior.
9. Individuals or groups acting in good faith are not responsible for the consequences of their actions.
10. Teaching the rules of morality will lead to higher levels of ethical behavior.
11. Moral decisions depend on encouraging people to be well intentioned.
12. Public actions are typically defended by the high moral intention of the promoters.
13. Biological factors are likely to determine a person's behavior.
14. Culture has a limited role in justifying variations in behavior.
15. Similarities are more important than differences across populations.
16. Cultural differences are not important.
17. It is possible to compare measured levels of moral development across cultures.
18. A good test will be valid in different cultural settings.
19. Variations in behavior are usually the result of cultural differences.
20. Apparent similarities across cultures are misleading.
21. Each culture influences its members to behave in unique ways.
22. Each culture must be understood from its own indigenous cultural perspective.

23. It is usually not possible to judge a person's behavior outside that person's cultural context.
24. Measures always need to be generated or modified to fit each cultural context.

SCORING AND DEBRIEFING GUIDELINES

1. Derive a score for Items 1 through 6 by adding up their scores. A high score will demonstrate your affiliation with the "consequentialist" approach to ethical judgment.
2. Derive a score for Items 7 through 12 by adding up their scores. A high score will demonstrate your affiliation with the "nonconsequentialist" but intention-based approach to ethical judgment.
3. Derive a score for Items 13 through 18 by adding up their scores. A high score will demonstrate your affiliation with an "absolutist" approach to ethical judgment.
4. Derive a score for Items 19 through 24 by adding up their scores. A high score will demonstrate your affiliation with a "relativist" approach to ethical judgment.

SOURCE: Adapted with permission from Pedersen, P. (1997b). Doing the right thing: A question of ethics. In K. Cushner & R. Brislin (Eds.), *Improving intercultural interactions: Vol. 2. Models for cross cultural training programs* (pp. 149–165) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.