

Contemplations on Ethics in Today's World – Michael Lewis

A good ethical dilemma fascinates me just like a good problem, puzzle, or riddle. Sometimes a complex dilemma becomes a real conundrum for everyone who is directly and indirectly involved in which the path to a solution and final resolution does not seem easy to attain and yet needs to be found. Sometimes the solution seems extremely obvious but only to those who are best positioned to examine it objectively, honestly, and unemotionally. In most cases, all any ethical dilemma really needs is some calm, clear, and objective thinking, in concert with a thorough review of the established code of ethics and a plan of action on how to proceed.

An ethical or moral dilemma although often very complex and layered is ultimately a great opportunity for a much closer examination of a troubling or concerning issue. It is a time for those concerned to reflect on what happened, what wrong or wrongs have been committed and to formulate a solution and resolution that satisfies all the parties. It forces us to have to really good think about something, to be able to see a full and complete view of the issue and to then to do so objectively. A successful resolution of ethical and/or moral dilemmas often leads to reviewing and revising existing policies or the creation of new policies. Simply put, the examination, discussion and resolution of ethical dilemmas had the added benefit of personal, professional and organization betterment and improvement...and that is a particularly good thing.

The word ethics is rooted in ethos is a word derived from Greek meaning "character". One's ethos or ethics is also about a person's (or organization or even national) guiding beliefs, principles, or ideals. At its heart, it's who we are and what we view as a right, correct, appropriate and in line with societal ideals and values. To be ethical is to true to oneself, to strive to do right and the right thing and hold fast to your beliefs and values particularly if placed in a challenging. Both on a personal and professional level, our ethics and our character is at the heart of what we stand for and are willing to stand against. It openly demonstrates through our words and deeds to others what believe in and believe is in the best interests and good of all concerned.

Ethics and Instincts

I want you to imagine yourself out for a walk beside a picturesque river on a beautiful sunny day when something at the side of the catches your eye. Alongside the walking path, you see a paper bag. A closer examination reveals it contain a large amount of money... at least a couple of thousand dollars in cash.

Now quickly ...what is **your** first **thought** or **instinct** on how to proceed? What are you going to do?

I have presented this very scenario for discussion various groups of people and it amazes me that you will inevitably generate a range of responses depending on each person's ethical core. Some people will humorously point to a finder's/ keeper's approach and will state how they plan to splurge on their newfound windfall. Other people however take a more considered approach in which they stop, reflect, and apply more reasoned and rational thinking sensing that a more responsible approach is needed.

Would a decision on what to do with is money be different if we had discovered it in the presence of others? Would someone in your group driven by a strong sense of doing right the right thing take charge?

Throughout the course of any ethical dilemma it can be remarkably interesting to see what solutions are proposed. The depth of personal character and judgment is revealed in way that only a complex problem could expose. When it comes down to it ethics and ethical behaviour most people either know or sense immediately what the right thing to do and act accordingly. For others, mired in the middle a dilemma they seem content in contemplating all their options including one that mitigate responsibilities and consequences.

I believe that one's character is often most honestly revealed when we make choices and decisions not under the scrutiny and judgment of others but when no one is watching, and we are alone. Our character is best revealed in the privacy of our own thoughts and actions. Ethics and being ethical is about doing the right thing in the moment whether or not we garner favour and acknowledgement from others. Being an ethical person or even an organization means doing the right thing, every time regardless of what others think.

Ultimately, I think most people will come to acknowledge that they would in most cases (but not in every case) do the ethical and responsible thing and report the found money to the authorities. Like a needle on a compass that always finds true magnetic north, our ethics often guided in tandem by our conscience usually points us, immediately or eventually to doing the right thing.

Ethics and a "White" Lie

Have you ever found yourself in a position to have no other choice but tell a "white" lie? Well, of course all of us at some point in our lives have found ourselves in a such a situation where in that moment our judgement tells us that to tell a small and harmless lie is a better, kinder, and more appropriate option than telling the truth. Our long-established view is that "white" lies are seen as a way to kindly spare someone's feelings. However, we know that lying and being deceitful even to be kind is fundamentally wrong and unethical. But that said can a falsehood be justified even if it is done from a point of view of kindness or thoughtfulness? Is there room for latitude when it come to ethics and if so, how do we reconcile that with what ethics means?

Throughout our lives there are numerous moments when we are faced with a challenge – telling the truth and evoking the emotional and mental consequences or carefully, cautiously and with consideration to people's feelings – tell a lie or a fib.

Perhaps we can conclude that in some cases and circumstances ethics and ethical behaviour is rather malleable and not as rigid as absolute right and absolute wrong thinking would allow but we also conclude that truly ethical people and organizations became that way because of an eternal vigilance and defense of the truth and of lawful and appropriate behaviour.

Ethics and the “Whistleblower” – A Modern Hero?

There has throughout history been those people who are compelled by their ethics to speak up and act on the face of what they perceive or understand is wrong, illegal, or unethical. Consequently, the emergence of a “whistleblower” can often be very polarizing and disruptive in an organization. In some cases, they are praised and admired for having the personal courage and intestinal fortitude for coming forward and speaking up, often when others could not or would not. All too often they face the wrath and suspicions of colleagues who would question their motives.

It takes someone with a strong and defined ethical core and steadfast character to know that they should come forward and to speak up to a wrong, knowing all along that throughout the process there could be significant consequences including to themselves.

They are not ignorant of the challenges and fear that speaking up and coming forward brings but are driven by greater forces within to act. Ethical people and by extension, ethical organizations and societies know that relaxing rules or looking away from unethical behaviour in time corrupts our values, beliefs, and principles. Having ethics means knowing that making compromises only can lead to the loss of integrity.

At the heart of ethics, we all soon discover that when it comes to decisions and choices that which is popular is not always right and that which is right is not always popular. Those who are guided by their convictions, values and principles are not seeking popularity but driven to address and confront a wrong as they see it and to affect positive change.

What We Permit, We Promote!

There might come a time or a situation in which you personally become aware of or are witness to something you consider unethical or immoral. This will be a test of your own ethical core and you will be challenged with the choice to act or not, to speak up or be silent, to come forward or retreat.

People of good character always will feel a need to act, if not immediately but after some careful consideration and consultation with others. You see whether we act and speak up or not, we are involved. Our knowledge of a wrong makes us culpable and our inaction empowers the wrong doers by condoning it.

Finally, to all those who have been victimized by unethical treatment or behaviours and wondered why all the good people who may have known and but chose to look away or remain uninvolved, I am reminded by a quote from the late Martin Luther King Jr... *“In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends”.*

Perhaps, it is not about people doing unethical things, its more about ethical people not speaking up and acting in the awareness of wrongdoing where in lies the real problem in today’s world.

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