



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Seven Step Method for Ethical Decision-Making

## Author(s)

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## Description

This ethical decision-making framework developed by Dr. Michael Davis of the Illinois Institute of Technology is useful in guiding discussions around case studies and other ethics courses and workshop activities.

## Body

### 1. State the Problem

What is the main issue at stake in this case?

### 2. Gather and assess relevant facts in the case

At this step it is important to address the non-ethical issues raised within the case. For example, one may need to know the legal constraints of the decision, technical aspects that loom large, or other issues. Since it is impossible to include all facts in a case-study, frequently you will have to make assumptions based on the information you do have.

### 3. Identifying the stakeholders

At this step, all stakeholders in the decision should be identified. As with Step 1, think broadly and generate a list of all possible individuals, groups, or entities (e.g.

the environment) that will be affected by the decisions to be made.

#### **4. Develop list of at least five options**

(Be imaginative, try to avoid “dilemma” - not “yes” or “no” but who to go to, what to say).

#### **5. Test options, using such tests as the following:**

- Harm test - does this option do less harm than any alternative?
- Publicity test - would I want my choice of this option published in the newspaper?
- Defensibility test - could I defend my choice of this option before a Congressional committee, a committee of my peers, or my parents?
- Reversibility test - would I still think the choice of this option good if I were one of those adversely affected by it?
- Virtue test - what would I become if I choose this option often?
- Professional test - what might my profession's ethics committee say about this option?
- Colleague test - what do my colleagues say when I describe my problem and suggest this option as my solution?
- Organization test - what does the organization's ethics officer or legal counsel say about this?

#### **6. Make a tentative choice based on steps 1 -5.**

Did you solve the problem with which you began?

#### **7. Make final choice (after reviewing steps 1- 6), act, and then ask:**

- What could make it less likely you would have to make such a decision again?
- What precautions can you take as individual (announce policy on question, change job, etc.)?
- What can you do to have more support next time (e.g., seek future allies on this issue)?
- What can you do to change organization (e.g., suggest policy change at next dept. meeting)?
- What can you do to change larger society (e.g. work for new statute or EPA regulation)?

## **Notes**

Adapted from Michael Davis, *Ethics and the University* (Routledge, London, 1999) pp. 166-67.

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## **Resource Type**

Educational Activity Description

## **Topics**

Ethical Decision-Making

## **Discipline(s)**

Teaching Ethics in STEM