

Ethics for the Real World

*Creating a Personal Code
to Guide Decisions in
Work and Life*

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Clinton D. Korver
with Bill Birchard

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Skillful Decision Making

*Man has a natural aptitude for virtue; but
the perfection of virtue must be acquired by
man by means of some kind of training.*

—Saint Thomas Aquinas¹

THE SEED FOR THIS BOOK was planted in the 1970s. It was sown during a moment of temptation to make the wrong ethical decision. Author Ron Howard, working as a decision-analysis consultant, was asked by a defense contractor to analyze which fighter plane the U.S. Air Force should choose for its fleet. The contract was big, lucrative, and appealing.

The client remarked, “Of course, we all know how the analysis will come out.”

Howard raised an eyebrow. Well, no, he had no idea. The contractor’s plane might easily be the best choice, but he would have to perform the analysis first. The unmistakable body language from the client, however, suggested Howard should give in to the temptation to skip a thorough analysis. Howard just needed to say yes to manipulating the results, and the contract was his.

Howard realized as never before how technical and financial analyses don’t offer all that is needed for smart decisions. He turned down the

defense contractor's job; he couldn't be tempted to cheat. But the episode turned him to a provocative question: how does a person systematically analyze situations to make clear and correct ethical decisions?

Years later, after teaching ethics for two and a half decades, he has collaborated with coauthor Clint Korver to put the answer in this book. The gist is this: We must *master ethical distinctions* to enable clear ethical thinking. We must *commit in advance to ethical principles*. And we must *exercise disciplined decision-making skills* to choose wisely.

By learning a new way of thinking, in other words, we can all become skillful ethical decision makers. That is the simple message of this book.

For Starters

We begin our journey when we recognize a common human flaw: for love, money, or other “good” reasons, we often violate our ethics. We lie to, deceive, steal from, or harm others. And the cause is usually the same: faulty thinking. Unless we develop ethical reasoning skills, we get comfortable with transgressions. And we develop bad habits. While we are asleep at the ethical wheel, unhappy surprises almost always follow.

But by breaking bad habits and forming new ones, we can remedy this flaw. We can learn to catch ourselves when starstruck by temptation. Not only can we know and do the right thing; we can transform episodes of temptation to our benefit, and to the benefit of those around us.

The goal of our efforts is straightforward: instead of ceding control to a weakness for ethical compromise, we learn to overcome it.

In the pages ahead, we will first sensitize ourselves to our ethical compromises. Usually such compromises stem from our being only vaguely aware of the scope of our indiscretions. Even an icon of honesty, Abraham Lincoln, compromised the truth more often than popular history allows. In 1858, as he ran for the U.S. presidency, it was often unclear whether he was speaking for or against slavery. Depending on whom he spoke to, and whether he was in the North or South, his messages seemed to contradict each other.

More recently, an icon of military history, Stephen Ambrose, was caught plagiarizing in at least five books. Bestselling author of *Citizen Soldiers* and *The Wild Blue*, he was lionized for his work initially, espe-

cially the books on World War II. He was a respected professor and became wealthy from royalties. But by all accounts, he continued to the end of his career to plagiarize. He appeared to sacrifice his character for convenience.

If Ambrose and Lincoln compromised their ethics for personal gain, are any of us immune to this flaw? In fact, most of us are vulnerable, and many times for even less worthy reasons—to dodge embarrassment, to impress friends, or simply to avoid the effort of thinking. In everyday affairs, we often dismiss minor ethical compromises. We slip into thinking that, for all practical purposes, we are ethically above reproach—at least we are *almost* above reproach.

Almost, like the executive who misses an appointment and, embarrassed to admit the truth, tells colleagues he was out sick. Almost, like a manager who inflates a travel voucher to compensate himself for “hardship” on the road. Almost, like a boss who salvages his promotion by assuming credit for a subordinate’s work.

Almost ethical but not quite. And we say to ourselves, “What great harm is there?” The harm is not so much in the small ethical mistakes themselves. It is in practicing distorted thought. It is in making a habit of fooling ourselves.

As we begin our journey to more effective and ethical thinking, whether as individuals, leaders, parents, teachers, or others, we may succumb to blurred reasoning. But we will finish with habits that allow us to draw bright ethical lines to consistently guide right action.

A Few Insights

Our experience as teachers and advisors has yielded many insights about ethical decision making. A few are worth mentioning from the start. The first is that people often make ethical choices reflexively. In the throes of a dilemma, when we are short on time or energy to think about tough issues, we let temptation blindside us. And we make snap decisions we regret.

A second insight is that as we rationalize our reflexive responses, we numb ourselves to ethical objections. We make a small compromise that serves as a precedent. That precedent leads to another, and then a third, and so on, until we lose sight of the principles we are violating. We dull our

faculty for discrimination. In the worst cases, we put ourselves on a slippery slope to committing serious transgressions.

A third is that our transgressions, contrary to our sense at the time, cause lingering discomfort. On the first day of our ethics classes, we ask students—many of whom have worked for a number of years—to cite an ethically sensitive situation that they have experienced. Many of them come up with a situation for which they feel remorse—a white lie here, a petty theft there. And the most bothersome is when such lapses soured relationships.

The message is that while we often think of ethics as shaping character, it may influence relationships even more. Ethical compromises erect social and emotional barriers between people—barriers that stubborn are hard to discuss. Tainted character is bad enough; strained relationships can be worse. Ethical compromise creates both.

In developing ourselves as skillful ethical decision makers, these three insights will emerge repeatedly. The lesson is that it is better to choose instead of react, to develop sensitivity instead of numbness, and to heed the impact of ethical lapses on relationships.

We Are They

Many people we encounter downplay the ramifications of inconsistent ethical conduct, especially when it comes to smaller compromises. On the path to becoming skilled ethical decision makers, however, we will find it helpful to take both big and small indiscretions seriously. Errors in thought are usually the same in both cases.

For example, we may refer to lying as exaggeration, taking creative license, spinning. We may excuse ourselves as being lawyerly, forgetful, or tactful. But when we use euphemisms for such actions, we redefine them as less than wrong. This inculcates a risky thinking pattern, where we cloud our ability to reason—and sometimes erroneously assume the reasoning makes sense to those we deal with.

In a Zogby International poll of eight thousand adults, 97 percent said they consider themselves trustworthy. On the other hand, only 75 percent consider the people they work with and live near trustworthy.² Allow us to speculate that the gap between these two figures may reflect more than

perception. Behaviors that may seem ethical to us may not be considered so high-minded by people we deal with.

As we stress in the chapters ahead, transgressions crop up in the lives of people across all levels of society. The individuals perpetrating them have all levels of education and work in all professions, trades, and industries. It is counterproductive to think we are not players on a landscape dotted with pitfalls we may stumble into ourselves. Temptation is everywhere—and so is compromise.

One danger is that we will get caught up in a sequence of not just small temptations but big ones. Maybe they will be life changing or life threatening. Faulty thinking can lure us into wrongs we never imagined. Philip Zimbardo, a psychology professor at Stanford University, has for decades studied the genesis of evil. He writes, “Virtually anyone could be recruited to engage in evil deeds that deprive other human beings of their dignity, humanity and life . . . we live with the illusion of moral superiority . . . We take false pride in believing that ‘I am not that kind of person.’”³

The fact is, we are all that kind of person. *We are they.* As we will see in the chapters ahead, through thinking errors, denial, and rationalization, we can all be put in a position of selling our character for a pittance, of sacrificing our relationships for a song. That’s yet another reason why it is helpful to take a conscious, systematic approach to breaking risky ethical thinking habits—on even the small things.

Our Prescription

The chapters of this book lay out a plan for that conscious effort. It is a plan to become skilled ethical decision makers.

In the first phase, we develop awareness of ethical temptation and compromise.

- **Chapter 1.** We sensitize ourselves to the most common ethical temptations, to lie, deceive, steal, or harm. Our goal is to become *aware* of these temptations—and the unintended consequences of our transgressions.

In the next phase, we learn how to use ethical logic and principles to foster clear thinking.

- **Chapter 2.** We learn the distinctions necessary to reason ethically: the difference between prudential, legal, and ethical dimensions of an action; between positive and negative ethics; and between the action-based and consequence-based schools of thought. Our goal is to become *thoughtful* about ethical reasoning.
- **Chapter 3.** We learn to identify the ethical principles we have derived, consciously or unconsciously, from our religion, upbringing, and culture. We also learn to identify the gaps where our existing principles give inadequate guidance. Our goal is to become *mindful* of our inner voice.

In the third phase, we learn to make ethical choices.

- **Chapter 4.** We identify the common ethical challenges in our life, evaluate them with ethical reasoning skills from chapter 2, and commit to new ethical principles. Our work is akin to setting up a filing system: once we allocate our ethical challenges to proper folders, we don't have to evaluate them anymore. Our goal is to create an ethical code. We can then use the code to make *disciplined, life-enhancing* decisions.
- **Chapter 5.** We learn the three-step process for creative ethical decision making. We practice clarifying the ethical challenge, generating creative alternatives, and evaluating alternatives to choose defensible, ethical responses. Our goal is to become skilled and *decisive*.

In the final phase, we learn to go beyond ethical basics to using ethics as a lever for better living.

- **Chapter 6.** Instead of using the three-step process just to do the “right thing,” we strive to use it to do the “best” thing. We learn to seek the whole truth of our behavior, reframe situations to focus on relationships, and use the “loved one” test. Our goal is to *transform* our personal life through wise ethical choices.
- **Chapter 7.** We learn to do the “best” thing at work as well in our personal lives. We again use the whole truth concept, reframe

situations to focus on relationships, and adopt the “loved one” test. Our goal is to *transform* our work life through wise ethical choices.

We all yearn to realize the best in ourselves. What confidence can we have that we are succeeding if we feel uncertain about whether we are making ethical decisions the right way? By developing new thinking habits, we learn how to respond intelligently to ethical challenges and live lives of meaning and integrity.

An Engineering Approach

Many books about ethics focus on weighty and controversial issues that few of us deal with in daily life—abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, dropping a nuclear bomb. This book, in contrast, focuses on issues that people routinely confront in daily life—white lies, secrets, promises, over-billing, putting others at risk. To this end, this book takes an engineering approach. What is an engineering approach? Engineers start on a project by listing the needs of the people they are serving so that they can deliver a successful product or system. Engineers then use fundamental principles of how people and systems operate to build a practical, satisfying solution.

We have done the same for ethics. We have discovered that people need decision-making tools that (1) offer clear ethical guidance, (2) are broadly applicable to everything from the most common to the most important ethically sensitive situations, and (3) are easy to understand and apply. We then built tools using fundamental principles of ethics and decision making, producing the solution you find in this book.

Engineers like to solve a problem once, not over and over again. That’s why the chief component of our solution is a personal ethical code. This code guides action in most ethically sensitive situations. Along with the code, we describe key distinctions and ethical decision-making skills to guide action in circumstances not encompassed by the code. Combined, these principles and tools allow readers to make skillful decisions in a wide variety of ethically sensitive situations.

Put another way, instead of prescribing ethics, the book asks readers to develop their own and to take personal responsibility for them. While our views are periodically evident and ardent, we don’t have a corner on

right answers. Individuals of every persuasion need to figure out their own ethics according to their own inner voices. This book is a self-help guide, assisting each person in avoiding everyday compromises through better thinking habits.

Because we want readers mainly to engineer their own decision-making capabilities, we urge people to resist the temptation to criticize the ethics of others. While criticism may be tempting, it distracts us from the main job: improving ourselves. The question is not whether the actions we see elsewhere in society are right or wrong. The question is what actions of our own will we embrace or shun. In other words, the goal of the book is for each of us to clarify our own principles. Pointing fingers at others slows our own improvement.

By taking an engineering approach, this book offers a way of learning ethical reasoning that is not available elsewhere. It is an approach growing out of the authors' expertise and experience in decision making. On the one hand, it builds on a foundation of rigorous academic research on the best way to make smart decisions. On the other, it translates complex principles from philosophy and behavioral research to provide a set of practical, lifetime tools for making decisions for personal growth.

A Few Clarifications

Before we get started, it is useful to clarify a few issues that often come up in ethics. The first is the distinction between *moral* and *ethical*. Although many people use the words interchangeably, we do not. For us, *moral* refers to behavior customary in our culture or society—or someone else's culture or society. *Ethical* refers to behavior considered right or wrong according to our own beliefs—no matter the culture or society.

Our parents may tell us that sex before marriage is immoral; our ethics may say it is not, or that it is not an ethical issue at all. Because the usage of the two words is confusing, we minimize the use of *moral*. And by our definition, this book is about ethics, not morals.

A second issue is the question of the scope of our ethical concern. Many people refer to environmental ethics, or the ethics of animal treatment, or the ethics of destroying historic sites. While the treatment of the environment, animals, and historic sites is important, we set such issues outside the field of personal ethics. Although harvesting a virgin rain for-

est may be reprehensible, we do not consider it a question of ethics unless the cutting involves compromises of lying, deceiving, stealing, or harming others. For this book, there must be an “other” involved for a situation to be ethically sensitive.

One crucial question of scope that does arise is how big a circle of concern do we draw around ethical decisions. Do we take into consideration the effects on just our family? Our community? Our company? Our nation? All of mankind? The decisions we make often depend on whose welfare we consider. Who are the stakeholders affected by the decision? How broadly do we want to cast our net? Our decisions about right and wrong must specify which people to include, or which stakeholders fall within the boundaries of our “ethical space.”

A third issue is whether the content of our thoughts is an ethical concern. We often hear “Thought is father to the deed.” Right thoughts may lead to right action; wrong ones to wrong action. But in our engineered approach to ethics, we concern ourselves only with action. Whether something is ethical or not is all a matter of its effect on others.

Interestingly, we find in our ethics classes that what particularly bothers students is not just memories of transgression. It is also an unease from not being clear about the ethical issues raised by a transgression. Was it really wrong? Why? People are bugged by ambiguity, especially the ambiguity of whether an issue was a matter of ethics to begin with.

In such cases, we offer another distinction, the difference between remorse and regret. When we ethically transgress, we often experience remorse. We may, of course, regret poor decisions that have nothing to do with ethics, but ethical compromises tend to feel different to us emotionally. They sit like a burr in our memory. We try over and over to file them away as experiences consistent with our values and self-image. But they don’t seem to fit in the values file; they stand out like stranded objects on the desktop of our mind. It is then, when we feel remorse, that we know we are ripe for learning a new way of ethical thinking.

Our Experience

As authors, we come to the subject of ethics from a unique standpoint. Ron Howard is a professor at Stanford University and director of the Decision and Ethics Center in the Management Science and Engineering

Department. He has taught ethics for twenty-five years. But he is known foremost as an expert in decision making. Over forty years ago, he coined the term *decision analysis* to describe an approach that is now a professional field providing decision assistance in business, medicine, engineering, and personal decisions.

Clint Korver is a serial entrepreneur in Silicon Valley who, as a graduate student in the early 1990s, helped Howard teach ethics classes. He also taught ethics as a visiting professor at Grinnell College. He is an expert in decision making. He is the founder and CEO of DecisionStreet, an Internet company that builds Web-based tools to help people make important life decisions in areas such as health, wealth, housing, and family affairs.

Together, we contribute something unique to the field of ethics. We draw on the wisdom of two separate fields to create one unified process. The combination of the two fields couldn't be more natural, as the challenge of ethics is the challenge to make smart decisions. The contribution by the two of us is in applying the rigorous methodology of our field to ancient ethical concepts. We thereby make the wisdom of the giants of ethical philosophy broadly useful.

Applying decision analysis to ethics offers a new avenue to making ethical decisions. As unskilled ethical decision makers, we can end up shaving off pieces of ourselves in order to live with ethical compromises. But as skillful decision makers, we can embrace our full selves and live simpler, more satisfying lives. Whereas we start our journey to effective ethical thinking with an uncomfortable flaw, we end up correcting that flaw and feeling comfortable in our own skin—and deepening our relationships with friends, family, and coworkers.