

Organizations today are dominated by instantaneous decision-making. In a fast-paced environment, there is often little time to consider the consequences and outcomes of decisions. Considering this, how does the decision-making process change when the decision being made is one based on morals and ethical guidelines? This is a difficult question to answer considering the modern day view on morals standards. The difference between right and wrong is often skewed. The definition of an ethical decision is subjective. The research presented in this paper will explore how to make ethical decisions in a world where moral boundaries rarely exist. It will answer the question: "Is it possible to make ethical decisions in today's organizations?" The hypothesis to this research is that it is possible to make ethical decisions in organizations today.

Before exploring this topic it is important to understand the various decision-making processes and the world's understanding of decision-making. Business Dictionary Online defines decision-making as "the thought process of selecting a logical choice from the available options." This definition offers a perfect example of how today's organizations view decision-making: money is the motive, and logic trumps morals. To fully understand decision-making, it is important to seek a deeper meaning: one that involves ethics and morals. This topic may seem arbitrary, but it is extremely relevant and important in today's society. According to a 2014 study, 91% of teens and 66% of adults do not believe in an absolute truth (Ingram). This idea that truth is relative continues to gain popularity. This makes ethical decision-making a difficult task in today's organizations.

This new trend has a huge impact on organizational ethical decision-making. The Journal of Higher Education explores how this issue begins in college. It discusses how college students are exposed to a new set of beliefs and ideas when they enter into higher education. In this

way, they are often influenced by their peers and are conditioned to make decisions based on social norms. This is the essence of moral relativism.

“Higher education literature suggests limited ability to develop internal organizational structures and processes to adapt to external challenges due to leaders not seeing higher education as shaped strongly by external forces and professional administrators not being trained in ways to respond” (Gehrke and Kezar, 395).

This means that students are not able to understand ethical decision-making in organizations, because they are not exposed to the external factors that may affect such decisions in the world outside of the classroom. This is where one can see that there is an evident issue when it comes to individuals being able to make ethical decisions in organizations.

Multiple studies proves how evident the struggle to make ethical decisions in modern organizations is in today's society. This is true for various types of organizations. For the sake of argument, the focus here will be on medical organizations (such as hospitals) and organizations related to business. In both of these organizations, there is an apparent need for ethical decision-makers. For example, those decisions in the medical industry directly affect the health and well-being of their customers. In business, decisions affect customers and employees in a significant way. These two types of organizations are vastly different; however, they are the same in that they run on specific funding. In this way, many decisions are meant to be made to increase profits. Both of these industries require a greater understanding of the ethical side of decision-making, which is why studies on this topic are so popular today.

In medical organizations, decisions are often made by a person who is placed in a position of power based on specific knowledge. The decision-maker is often making a decision

for someone who is deemed not competent enough to do so on their own due to lack of knowledge of physical restrictions. In this case, medical professionals are in a position to decide what their patient considers to be ethical. The book “Deciding for Others” discusses how the idea of surrogate decision-making in such organizations is an ethical struggle. Surrogate decision-making is defined in this book as making decisions for others; specifically regarding doctors and patients. This is a struggle, because the patient’s idea of what is right can be different than what the doctor considers to be right. For example, a doctor may consider a certain dosage of painkillers to be ethical in order to alleviate pain, while the patient may consider it to be unethical due to possible addiction and side-effects. This is why the book focuses mainly on how to decipher whether or not a patient is competent enough to make decisions on their own.

In situations where the doctor is required to decide what is ethical for the patient, the book offers a set of rules as a guideline for the solution. The first two principles mentioned involve getting to know the patient so that a decision can be made in the patient’s best interest. This means that, even if what the patient wants opposes the ethical code of the doctor, the decision must be made as the patient would have made it. This is defined as “substituted judgement” (Brock and Buchanan, 10). The next two principles discuss how to make ethical decisions when the patient has not made his or her ethical standards known to medical professionals. In this case, doctors must make decisions based on knowledge, reason, and law. Rather than making a decision based on what is known to be right, reason takes precedent and the most knowledgeable doctor makes a decision to avoid a lawsuit. Therefore, decisions can be made based on what the patient believes to be ethical, and law. This leaves no room to make ethical decisions in the medical field, because the moral code is so subjective.

Based on such studies and information, how can one make a moral decision in a medical organization? While such organizations have a loose set of ethical standards and take ethical power away from decision-makers, there are still ways to make ethical decisions in this environment. A case study done by Dr. Schumann and Dr. Alfandre offers a solution to clinical ethical decision-making using the “four topics approach.” The four topics include medical indications, patient preferences, quality of life, and contextual features. This offers a deeper perspective into medical decision-making, and allows the medical professional to have more freedom in making ethical decisions. While decisions are still essentially up to the patient, this case study explains how the doctor still has great power over that decision. The doctor has influence in that they can offer medicine as they see fit based on medical indications and quality of life. They must also remain loyal and fair to the patient, while considering the family and values of the patient. (Alfandre and Schumann, 36-42). In this way, they are utilizing the four topics in order to make an ethical influence to increase the chances of a better decision being made. As research shows, ethical decision-making in medical organizations is possible if the doctors keep the patient’s best interests in mind.

Organizations in business face the same problems that medical organizations face in ethical decision-making. It is an issue of deciding what is right, and how to know what is right. It seems that in the medical industry, the right decision is the one that helps the patient. Decisions are vastly important in that they may affect someone’s health or physical quality of life. While business decisions may not be as crucial, decisions in business organizations can affect a vast number of people ranging from employees to customers to the general public. An academic paper from the Journal of Public Affairs explores how subjective meanings have affected ethical

decision-making in such an industry. Leadership is an important element in being a decision-maker in a business organization; however, even the criteria for being a decision-maker has become subjective. “Leadership as a concept has dissolved into small and discrete meanings, with more than 130 different definitions” (Uzonwane, 287). In other words, even the qualifications to be a leader in an organization have become subjective. This proves that the issues in organizational decision-making are rooted in the subjective environment that surrounds it.

According to The Academy of Management, business ethics continues to become a hot topic. Due to multiple public scandals in large business over the past few decades, schools and businesses have taken extra measures to ensure an education in business ethics. With this being a clear problem, one may wonder if it is at all possible to make ethical decisions in a business organization. For the sake of argument and comparison, the focus here will be on leaders in business. This will include those with legitimate and expert power, since that was the focus in arguing ethics from medical organizations. Leaders in business are faced with ethical issues that can affect employees beneath them, employers above them, and an entire customer base. Making ethical decisions is something that seems like it should go hand-in-hand with any job in an organization, but in business this can be problematic when money is the ultimate goal. As the past has shown, profit is prioritized over ethics in such organizations. A business can still operate without ethics, but it cannot operate without money. This is where leaders in business organizations are faced with issues in ethical decision-making.

An article from Academy of Management Review by Thomas Jones of the University of Washington demonstrates how decisions are made when an ethical dilemma takes place. The

model demonstrated in this article is psychology-based, and it is effective in four environments: social, cultural, economic, and organizational. Each applies to a business organization. The model exhibits four steps that take place when someone must make a decision based on morals and values. The first step is to recognize moral issue. This is the point at which one recognizes that there is an issue present. Specifically, a moral issue involves a situation where a decision will harm or benefit others. Upon reaching this step, one must make a moral judgement. During this stage cognitive moral development and moral evaluation are occurring. This means that the decision-maker is understanding the dilemma more fully, and is forming values specific to that situation. Following this is the step involving forming moral intent. This occurs immediately prior to actually making the decision and acting on it. This is when the values developed from the previous stage come together and turn into a more active thought process. Finally, the decision-making will engage in moral behavior. (Jones, 307).

Understanding such a process, one can clearly see the point at which the ethical standards for the decision are formed. During the second phase of the process that was previously mentioned the leader making the decision forms an ethical code. As stated in the article, this code is dependent upon the cognitive moral development of the individual. This is to say that ethical behavior depends on the cognitive ability of the individual when it comes to morals. Thus, ethical behavior and decisions are possible in business organizations. It depends on the moral structure within the the individual decision-maker. If someone works to become conditioned in moral behaviors and creates strong, rooted morals, that person can be an ethical decision-maker.

To compare, one can see that ethical decision-making is possible in both medical and business organizations. However, this is made possible under vastly different structures. In the medical industry, one must work around strict rules, laws, and guidelines. The decision can also have a bigger impact on an individual since it is directly related to that person's physical or mental well-being. In business, the decision-making process is more dependent on the individual making the decision. The decisions in business organizations also have different consequences than in medicine, but they can also touch a wider range of people. Although such industries and organizations are so different, they both ultimately rely on individuals being faced with ethical dilemmas who must make decisions in the face of strict laws and profit-hungry employers. In this way, the solutions to each can be similar.

Kohlberg's model of moral development demonstrates how each individual has the ability to make ethical decisions in any organization (medical or business) through six stages. The stages start out considering easy situations like following the rules, but they progress to engage a deeper thought process. The first stage involves an overview of general rules. This considers how individuals will make decisions to avoid punishment. In stage two, individuals engage in behavior for the purpose of being rewarded. According to laws of human nature, this is an underlying motivation in every decision humans make. In stage three, decisions-makers adapt to the social norm and decide what is right based on the general consensus of people around them. Stage four involves individuals creating a set of ethical standards based on society. That person then applies that to what they see in society. In stage five, the decision-maker becomes more aware of individual rights and the good of others. That person begins to form a higher level ethical code that is more specific to the needs of society as a whole and human rights. Finally,

stage six involves the individual creating a new set of ethical guidelines and morals based on the values that he or she has formulated throughout said process. This stage also involves the decision-maker following these values regardless of consequences and outcomes. (Jones 383-384).

Having said this, it can be concluded that the decision-maker as an individual is responsible for being able to make ethical decisions. Laws and guidelines in hospitals and business organizations allow individuals the freedom to make ethical decisions. Therefore, laws are not a viable excuse for not making ethical decisions. However, the social environment and the notion of moral relativism are still heavy factors. The idea of moral relativism and how to work around it is an entirely separate topic in and of itself; but it is still relevant in ethical decision-making today. Kohlberg's six-stage model of moral development explores how moral relativism occurs through formulating opinions based on social implications. Therefore, it seems as though the only way to understand a universal moral truth as a guide to ethical decision-making in organizations is to avoid contradicting one's own beliefs and values as they pertain to human rights and benefit of the masses.

The hypothesis that was formulated prior to such research stated that it is possible to make ethical decisions in today's organizations. In the current culture, this is a difficult statement to prove. This is due to moral relativism and subjective truths. However, research shows that this hypothesis was correct, and individuals can make ethical decisions in today's organizations. Exploring medical organizations proved that there are strict guidelines that can inhibit the power of the decision-maker so that ethical boundaries are placed in the hands of the patient. Upon further research, there was proof that the system allows doctors and decision-makers in these

organizations enough freedom to be in charge of ethical decisions. Business organizations differed in decision types, but was ultimately the same. Research showed that ethical business decisions are possible through the demonstration of the psychological moral decision-making process. In essence, ethical decision-making is possible in any organization, even when the social norms do not provide absolute truths. As long as the individual formulates an ethical code based on the common good of others and basic, generally-understood human rights, the individual will make decisions based on that morally sound ethical code regardless of social implications. Therefore, it is possible to make ethical decisions in organizations.

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