



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

“Right vs. wrong” or is it “Right vs. right?”

How would you handle these ethical dilemmas?

When faced with a “right versus wrong” decision, the Institute for Global Ethics¹ provides a series of simple tests for you to utilize. I have taken the liberty to add a slight safety and health spin.

The Legal Test – Is your choice against safety and health laws or regulations?

The Stench Test – Does your choice feel wrong deep within your gut?

The Front Page Test – How would you feel if your decision was headlined on the front page of your local newspaper? How would your community react if it read about your actions?

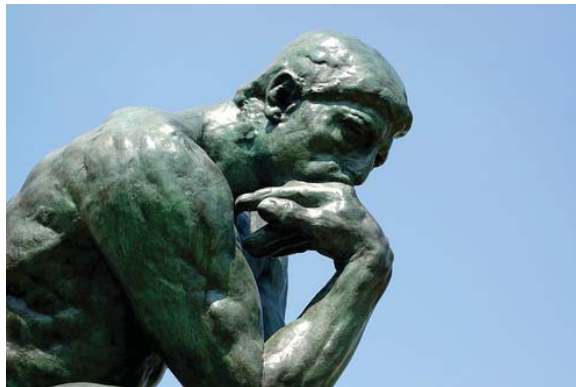
The Mom Test – What would she decide to do?

The Profession Test – Is your choice consistent with the standards of conduct followed in the safety (ASSE) or health (AIHA/ACGIH) professions?

Ain’t necessarily so

Just because our actions may be legal does not necessarily make them right or result in desired outcomes. Shrader-Frechette and Cooke² argue that current (*de jure*) performance standards, set by laws and regulations to reduce employee exposures, fail to promote *de facto* worker welfare (protection) because employers and employees do not follow the necessary means (i.e., specification standards) to achieve the end (i.e., performance standards) of workplace safety.

The more difficult ethical challenges we face involve deciding between “Right vs. Right” dilemma paradigms. Dr. Rushworth Kidder³ describes four common paradigms as: *Truth vs. Loyalty*; *Individual vs. Community*; *Short-term vs.*



Long-term; and Justice vs. Mercy.

Safety and health dilemmas

Truth vs. Loyalty – Susan, a certified industrial hygienist, finished reading a five-year-old epidemiological study of her plant employee population and realized that the employees of one of the manufacturing units had elevated levels of a little-studied blood marker suspected in causing larynx cancer. Susan has demonstrated a strong loyalty to her boss and company and recently celebrated her 20th anniversary with the company. She is a single mom with an 18-year-old son who has just been accepted to Tulane University and is counting on the company’s college tuition assistance program. Should Susan report her findings, or play down the findings to management based on the lack of larynx cancer cases?

Individual vs. Community – Jack, a certified safety professional, has just been hired for the safety and health manager position at a manufacturing plant, which has just celebrated its 100th anniversary. Jack realizes that the plant is woefully deficient in safety and health practices even though the plant has not had any significant safety or health incidents. During one of his walkarounds, Jack notices an open concrete pit of liq-

uid sulfur with no railing releasing sulfur-containing gases. None of the workers in the room with the pit are wearing any respirators. Knowing the previous safety and health manager resigned after three months, should Jack elevate his concern to the plant manager now and possibly jeopardize his future career or initiate a study to evaluate the workplace atmosphere, which likely will lead to an expensive retrofit of the open pit?

Short-term vs. Long-term

– Senior management has informed Dominick, the plant’s safety trainer, to cut his training budget by 70 percent. The plant has a population of 3,000 employees and 1,200 contractors, of which most are not current in mandatory OSHA training. Dominick recognizes the need for budget reductions due to the current recession, but he also understands the benefits that can be attributed to investing in safety training. What should Dominick do?

Justice vs. Mercy – Richard, a plant mechanic, has been working for the company for 31 years and has always been known to get the job done no matter what. Richard has had numerous close calls when it comes to safety, not only endangering himself but fellow workers. Tom, the new plant manager, meets with Richard to discuss a recent incident. Tom learns that Richard wants to retire in three years. Should Tom terminate Richard, or should he place Richard on probation?

Climate control?

Does an organization’s ethical climate have any bearing on safety performance? Parboteeah and Kapp^{4,5} investigated the role of ethics as it relates to an employee’s safety-related behavior (i.e., safety

compliance and safety participation) in the workplace. Parboteeah and Kapp utilized the Victor and Cullen^{6,7} typology of ethical climates – Egoistic (maximizing self-interests), Benevolent (maximizing the interests of all employees), and Principled (maximizing adherence to rules and procedures).

Egoistic ethical climates were neither related to injuries nor safety-enhancing behaviors. Benevolent ethical climates were negatively associated with incidence of injuries and unrelated to safety-enhancing behaviors. Principled ethical climates, the ideal, had the highest positive effect on safety-enhancing behaviors, which fostered sustained organizational safety performance.⁸

Rather than attempting to change a company's ethical climate, Kapp and Parboteeah⁹ suggest tailoring the safety program to the company's ethical climate. The *Ethical Climate Questionnaire*¹⁰ was used to determine the company's ethical climate.

For egoistic ethical climates, the safety program should target specific safe behaviors, not the nonoccurrence or non-reporting of incidents, and constantly reward them when they occur.

In the case of a benevolent ethical climate, the safety program should frequently communicate the risk of injury through consistent safety messages that stress the importance of following safety procedures to avoid injury.

For principled ethical climates, resources should be focused on establishing or sustaining a comprehensive safety program based on processes and procedures.

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1 Institute for Global Ethics. "Facing a tough choice right now?" Available for download at www.globalethics.org/resources <<http://www.globalethics.org/resources>>. These five tests are used as part of the Institute's *Ethical Fitness® Seminar*.

2 Shrader-Frechette, K. and R. Cooke. "Ethics and Choosing Appropriate Means to an End: Problems with Coal Mine and Nuclear Workplace Safety." *Risk Analysis* 24.1 (2004): 147-56.

3 Kidder, Rushworth M. *How Good People Make Tough Choices – Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. 2nd edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. The first chapter is available for download at www.globalethics.org/resources <<http://www.globalethics.org/resources>>. These four dilemma paradigms are used as part of the Institute's *Ethical Fitness® Seminar*.

4 Parboteeah, K.P. and E.A. Kapp. "Ethical Climate and Workplace Safety Behavior: An Empirical Investigation." *Journal of Business Ethics* 80.3 (2008): 515-29.

5 Kapp, E.A. and K.P. Parboteeah. "Ethical Climate & Safety Performance." *Professional Safety* 53.7 (2008): 28-31.

6 Victor, B. and J.B. Cullen. "A theory and measure of ethical climate in organizations." In W.C. Frederick (Ed.), *Research in corporate social performance* 9 (1987): 57-71.

7 Victor, B. and J.B. Cullen. "The organizational bases of ethical work climates." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33.1 (1988): 101-25.

8 Parboteeah, K.P. and E.A. Kapp, pp. 525-527.

9 Kapp, E.A. and K.P. Parboteeah, pp. 31.

10 Cullen, J.B., B. Victor, and J.W. Bronson. "The ethical climate questionnaire: an assessment of its development and validity." *Psychological Reports* 73 (1993): 667-74.



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