

# **A Synthetic Process Model for Ethics Decisions**

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## Overview

### Stage 1: *Interpreting the Situation*<sup>10</sup>

1. **Explain** the situation. Straightforward: here's the situation that we are presented with.
2. **Enumerate** questions that this situation raises. Basically this is the answer to the question: What are the problems and issues being faced in the situation?
3. **Determine** the major stakeholders.

### Stage 2: *Formulating an Ethical Decision*<sup>3</sup>

4. **Discern** the possible courses of action.
5. **Generate** outcomes- as many positive and negative outcomes as you can think of.

### Stage 3: *Reaching a Decision*<sup>10</sup>

6. **Seek** consultation.
7. **Identify** for each course of action
  - a. Universal Ethical Values involved,
  - b. Ethical codes and standards that are involved, and
  - c. Competing personal and cultural values involvedBe sure to identify how values or standards may be in conflict or competition and ways to resolve which ones have a "higher" value in this circumstance.
8. What **legal issues** are involved that could impact the situation?
9. Explore ways to **resolve the conflicts**.

### Stage 4: *Planning and Executing the Selected Course of Action*<sup>10</sup>

10. **Determine** a reasonable answer and course of action.
11. **Execute** the plan and **document** the results.

## A Synthetic Ethical Process Model:

### Detailed Outline

#### Stage 1: *Interpreting the Situation*<sup>10</sup>

- ❖ Develop sensitivity and awareness of the issues
- ❖ **Explain** the scenario. Straightforward: Here's the situation that we are presented with. "Fact finding" may have to be expanded after the issues are enumerated.
- ❖ **Enumerate** questions that this scenario raises. What are the problems and issues being faced in the scenario?<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Determining major stakeholders and their ethical claims: Whose interests are involved? Who can be harmed?<sup>2</sup>

Typical Roles of Persons Who Have Interests and vulnerabilities	Significant	Moderate	Minimal/none
Client			
Family			
Staff member			
Agency			
Professional field			
Community/ public safety			

- ❖ Which interests, if any are in conflict?
- ❖ Once you have developed this much information it may be helpful to obtain consultation.

Stage 2: *Formulating an Ethical Decision*<sup>3</sup>

- ❖ Generate or **discern** possible and probable **courses of action**.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ **Generate outcomes**- as many positive and negative outcomes for each course of action as you can think of. With complicated decisions, it is necessary to actually write down the anticipated outcomes in a decision-making chart or table. There could be far more than two alternatives. Consultation from colleagues normally produces additional ones.<sup>6</sup>

Likely Positive Outcomes	Likely Negative Outcomes
<b>Option A</b>	
<b>Option B</b>	

- ❖ Determine what codes, principles, and institutional policies and procedures might apply
  - \* Universal Ethical Values<sup>4</sup> involved,
    1. BENEFICENCE: likelihood that it will help, or do good for the client;
    2. NON-MALEFICENCE: likelihood that it will not harm the client;
    3. AUTONOMY: likelihood that it will foster the client's autonomy;
    4. FIDELITY: the degree to which it is true to what was promised;
    5. JUSTICE: balancing the needs or rights of one versus another
  - \* Ethical codes and standards that are involved,
    1. Your Agency's Code of Professional Practice
    2. Your Professions' Code (s) of Ethics
    3. What standards of professional propriety, organizational policy or historical practice apply to this situation? (That is, what is the "common law" of professional ethics?)
    4. Your Licensing Boards' Code (s) of Professional Conduct
  - \* Cultural values involved
  - \* Personal values involved
- ❖ What **legal issues** could impact the situation?
- ❖ Identify how values or standards (within or between relevant codes) may be in conflict or competition. Consider contextual influences at all levels involved.

### Stage 3: *Reaching a Decision*<sup>10</sup>

- ❖ Explore ways to resolve conflicts.
  - If possible, avoid ethical dilemmas or conflicts by anticipating and taking preventative steps.
  - Synthesize relevant values codes or seek courses of action that reconcile them.
  - If necessary, make a value decision.<sup>7</sup>
    1. Which values are in conflict?
    2. Which values are “higher” in this circumstance? There is not an automatic rank-order, except that if life is at stake it is not difficult to determine what is most important.
    3. Whose interests are most sensitive?
    4. What risks may be irreversible or so serious that risk tolerance must be low?
    5. Identify the central problem or ethical dilemma and focus analysis on it.
    6. The issue in most complex situations is not what is ethical -- it is the comparable ethicality of the various options for action. How might a given course of action fulfill each of the five universal ethical principles above? This is often determined by the **degree** of good to be achieved or the **degree** of harm to be avoided. In each situation the analysis of how each of these principles would be met may produce a different pattern of positive vs. negative outcomes.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ Narrow to a few likely courses of action. Then review the outcome tables, comparing those.
- ❖ This is the most critical point at which to use consultation. If you have had to do this much analysis to know what to do, the situation is complex enough that you should get consultation by this point.

Stage 4: *Planning and Executing the Selected Course of Action*<sup>10</sup>

- ❖ Maintain your line of communication with your consultant.
- ❖ **Determine** a reasonable course and sequence of actions.
- ❖ Anticipate personal and contextual barriers to plan execution and develop effective counter measures.
- ❖ **Carry out** the plan.
- ❖ **Document:**  
Describe the facts of the situation

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	Impact on Client Care	Consultation (with whom)	Outcome Of consultation	Any Documentation
Client Care				
Ethical Concerns				
Legal Concerns				

Corrective Action:

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❖ **Evaluate** the course of action. Prepare for after-shock and learn for next time.<sup>9</sup>  
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## Notes

1. “Explain” and “enumerate questions” sections are from the *MARRCH Ethical Standards User’s Guide, 2000*.
2. Table and identification of whose interests are involved from White, William L. 1993. Critical Incidents: Ethical Issues in Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment. Bloomington, IL: Lighthouse Institute, p. 27.
3. Basic process of the Stage 2 section is after Schoener, Gary, but the details of the section are modified from Schoener
4. Specific basis of these five values in the history of ethical codes is from Schoener, Gary. Also cited by others in the literature as universal values.
5. “Discern” and “identify” sections are from MARRCH Ethics Manual, op.cit.
6. Details and table for outcomes section are from Schoener, Gary, op.cit.
7. Most of the questions regarding how to choose between conflicting values can be found in White, William L., op.cit.
8. Paragraph six is from Schoener, Gary, op.cit.
9. “Determine”, “carry out”, and “document” sections, including the documentation table are from MARRCH, op.cit.
10. All Stage identifications are modified considerably from stages in “Integrative Decision-Making Model of Ethical Behavior in Counseling” from Rehabilitation Counseling: Profession and Practice. “Developing sensitivity” and “contextual factors” also come from this source.