

Tough Choices: The Challenge of Leadership in the 90's

Judith V. Waymire

You supervise 15 volunteers in your very busy, understaffed office. Mrs. Gibson is your most valuable volunteer. She is organized, works long hours, fulfills her responsibilities in nearly every way, and has potential for a more responsible position. However, she undermines morale by disparaging other volunteers' work and then threatens to leave unless you put forward her name as board president. What do you do?

Factors in choosing often make "right" and "wrong" less than perfectly clear. Making choices is even harder when you're a volunteer administrator, because you're not just making personal choices but choices that affect volunteers, staff, stakeholders, and constituents.

What affects the choices we make?

Self esteem is one of the factors in choosing. How do we feel about ourselves? Do we "give in" to gain acceptance by the group or "stand firm" even when we're standing alone?

Ethical reasoning involves several other types of choices.

1. Legalities vs. compassion
2. Set beliefs vs. situation-driven

3. Results of actions vs. intentions

Roles, status, and structures all compete as we try to make rational choices. By recognizing the various pressures, we can make choices more reflectively, more self-consciously, and more consistently.

1. The roles we play (Director of Volunteer Services, treasurer of our club, daughter, friend, mother, etc.) all carry behavioral expectations. An administrator needs to be equitable, a daughter needs to be loyal to family, a treasurer needs to be honest, etc.
2. Roles may often be in conflict with the status we have acquired. Can you be a sympathetic friend and collect dues? Can you be a compassionate mother and a disciplinarian?
3. The social structures in which we work (office, tennis team, church, family, etc.) also suggest norms for behavior which may conflict with our personal norms. Do I play office politics to get a promotion? Can I work for a health organization and be a smoker? Can I be an aggressive fundraiser for the church?

Judith V. Waymire was educated in Ohio and Indiana and was a full time volunteer until 1984 when she took her first paid position as Special Events Coordinator with the Volunteer Centre of Metro Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She held the position of Director of Regional Services with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. More recently she has joined the Canadian Hearing Society Foundation as Managing Director. As an advocate of volunteer management, Ms. Waymire gives workshops on volunteer recruitment, training and orientation, and recognition. She has published numerous articles and handbooks for leadership development for youth.

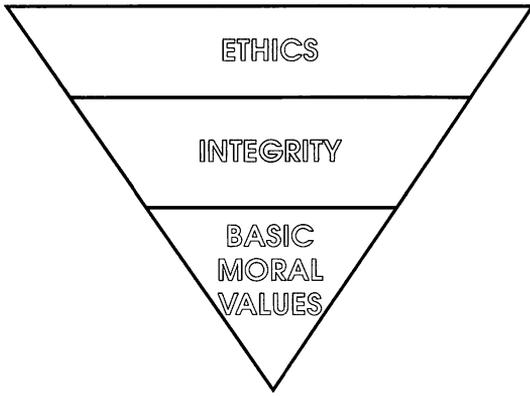


Figure 1
Leadership Value Progression

Basic moral values (see Figure 1) are at the core of leadership. For the most part, effective leaders have a solid moral foundation, a sense of right and wrong and what is important. Effective leadership, especially for a volunteer administrator, springs from a commitment to personal values, such as straightforwardness, truthfulness, honesty, respect for others, and justice. At the heart of all behavior are personal values, deep-rooted principles which impact our choices, behaviors, and attitudes. By examining our values, we become more sensitive to why we make the choices that we do.

Integrity is the cement which holds personal values together. It is the behavior consistent with those values. An individual must act by principle rather than expediency. A leader can only maintain trust if decisions are consistent and predictable. It is devotion to what is right and just. This means that I will do exactly what I say I will do. Integrity does not allow for compromise.

Ethics are personal values translated into action. They are the norms that govern behavior in a group. Leaders are responsible for establishing and maintaining the code of ethics in a group by their own actions, by reinforcing appropriate behaviors and communicating their positions to others.

One of the major tasks of a volunteer administrator is to examine this value

base, discard values left from history if they aren't appropriate, and take ownership of values that work. This, in turn, helps us develop a clearer understanding of our behavior so that we can better control our lives.

You know you're in a tough choice dilemma when your stomach gets tied in knots and you say, "Help, what should I do here?" An ethical dilemma often tugs between "wants" and "duties."

FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the dilemma?
2. What are the facts here?
3. What values are apparent in this situation?
4. Which values do I wish to advance here?
5. What are the alternative courses of action/options?
6. What are the consequences, risks, implications of each option?
7. What is my decision?

Then answer these bottom-line considerations:

1. Ultimately, I have to take responsibility for what I do or don't do.
2. Can I live with this decision?
3. Is my action ultimately doing more good than harm?
4. How is my decision affecting the "stakeholders" in this situation?
5. Am I using excuses to justify my behavior?
6. Would I be proud to have my decision placed in headline news?
7. Am I practicing the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"?

Personal values affect our choices but, as leaders, we also need to be especially

