

The Ethics Litmus Test

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON



Sooner or later, it will happen. And when it does, you will likely spend at least one sleepless night wondering what you should do. We're talking about ethical dilemmas, and they are some of the toughest leadership decisions you will ever make.

The desire for a common set of ethical guidelines was a primary driver in establishing this Association back in 1934. The principles found in the IRWA Code of Ethics sets a high standard for measuring professional performance, and today continues to serve as the foundation for right of way professionals. In fact, this strong sense of professional ethics is what differentiates IRWA members in the industry.

Conversely, leadership doesn't come with an agreed upon code of ethics to follow. Of course, there are common reference points you can use as a guide, such as the Golden Rule. But at the end of the day, a question of our own interpretation remains. Did we ascertain and weigh ALL of the facts? Did we conduct ourselves in the MOST ethical and competent manner possible? Did we accept our FULL share of responsibility?

We evaluate our own performance and behavior based on our intentions. Others, not knowing our intentions, evaluate us based on their perceptions of our behavior. Leaders often operate in that gray area where the support of others is based on their agreement with our decisions.

EASY CALLS AND TOUGH CALLS

Most of us know the difference between right and wrong. Those are the easy decisions. The problems that cause you the biggest pain are the choices we need to make between right and more right and wrong and less wrong.

For instance, we all know that it is wrong to blatantly lie. And if we look at a decision to lie as a mere choice between right and wrong, our answer is pretty obvious. But that's not usually the kind of choice that that leaders are called to make. It isn't right to lie, but how about bending or slanting the truth to present the facts in the most favorable manner? Is it a lie or is it just part of a negotiation? Is the answer influenced by how important the choice is to our career?

TEST YOUR ETHICS

When you find yourself in that uncomfortable situation, here are six questions that can help you decide if your course of action is the right one. The following Ethics Litmus Test is adapted from the work of pastors Harry Emerson Fosdick and Dr. Preston Bradley.

1. Does your course of action seem logical, responsible and legal? This is the absolute minimum, so if your choice of action doesn't meet this criteria, you have a problem.
2. Would the results be beneficial if everyone made the same decision? This question forces you to address the issue of fairness.
3. How will your decision affect others and where will it lead you? If your course of action will take you farther away from a position of honesty, integrity and trust, it is not the right one.
4. When you look back on this decision, will you think well of yourself? Think of the person you want to be in five years. Would that person make this decision?
5. How would the person you most admire handle the situation? What would your hero do? If that person wouldn't do it, why would you?
6. What would your friends and family think of your decision not IF but WHEN they read about it in the news or see a video about it on YouTube? When you do something that isn't right, you are only a photo or upload away from it going public.

Leaders earn and sustain the trust of others by doing what is right rather than focusing on who is right. If your tough choices stand up to these six questions, you are on the right track. It may not be easy, but it will be right.

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