

# The Role of Intent in Ethical Decision Making: The Ethical Choice Model

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*This paper reviews the major theories, studies and models concerning ethical decision making in organizations. The authors drew upon Jones' Model (1991) as the foundation for their Ethical Choice Model, which is designed to further clarify the ethical decision making process as it relates to the construct of intentionality. The model, illustrated through an HR case example, serves as a practical system for assessing the impact of values and beliefs and intentionality on ethical dilemmas.*

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American corporate values and principles are topics of discussion not only in courtrooms and boardrooms but around the water cooler and dinner table as well. As a result, employees at all levels in both private and public sectors have become more aware of and concerned about what constitutes ethical behavior. In recent years, scholars and practitioners have contributed to our understanding of the issues surrounding ethical choices. However, as Hatcher (2000) reminds us, there is still no universally accepted means for analyzing ethical situations. McDowell (2000) notes that most people in the United States believe that both government and business leaders should be trustworthy and expect them to behave in ways that indicate they are putting the needs of customers, clients and communities above their own monetary interests. However, when informed of scandals like Enron, Adelphia, Tyco, Anderson, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley became newsworthy, many Americans began questioning the values and ethics of corporate leaders. For HRD professionals, in particular, ethical concerns arise out of conflicts of interest. Practitioners wear many hats (McLean, 2001); as a result, they sometimes find themselves representing more than one group in program planning or decision making situations or violating policies, principles or standards (Ilaniska & Rocco, 2006). A number of ethical decision making models have been suggested by scholars during the past few years; most of these specify several specific variables or factors that influence ethical choice (Low, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000), providing a framework for how ethical decisions are made in organizations. Recent models point to an interactionist approach, suggesting that the process includes an intermingling of individual and situational factors. HRD scholars are interested in determining how this process unfolds so that they can more effectively understand how ethical decisions are made in the workplace (Johnson & Wiswell, 2006). Of particular interest to the authors of this paper is the moral intensity construct which places greater emphasis on context and the judgment of the decision maker within that context. Some researchers (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Dubinsky & Loken, 1989) point to the importance of intent in making moral decisions, and agree that intent is used by individual decision makers to form a moral judgment by using the available information to make as rational and moral a decision as is possible (Johnson & Wiswell, 2006). Kohlberg (1969) notes its significance by identifying moral intent as the third step in his Four-Step Ethical Decision Making Model and concludes that it precedes actual ethical or unethical behavior. To explain how intent is used in our paper, we will use the Jones (1991) model, which identifies six characteristics or dimensions of moral intensity. Jones suggests that "moral intensity captures the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation" (p.372).

## Statement of the Problem

Researchers have isolated a number of factors and introduced several models that influence moral choices and serve to explain ethical behavior. This paper reviews these models and the research, with a focus on Jones (1991) who determined that the moral intensity of an issue significantly impacts upon the ethical decision making process. In explaining his ethical decision making model, Jones describes six characteristics that comprise the construct of moral intensity. After a discussion of this model and the impact of intensity and intent on the ethical decision making process, the authors of this paper introduce a new ethical decision making model that builds upon the Jones model and incorporates intensity as a primary characteristic. Finally, the authors will demonstrate how "consumer friendly" the model is by offering and illustration of an HRD professional who uses it when faced with an ethical dilemma.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept of ethics is an ancient one, perhaps as old as the oldest societies of men and women on this planet. Ethical choices grow out of personal definitions of what is good and bad, right and wrong. The word is derived from the *ethos*, a Greek word meaning *custom* (Ianinska & Rocco, 2006); the field of ethics, known also as moral philosophy, is a “theory of moral knowledge which concerns itself with ethical language and its uses and convention” (Almond, 1999, p.2). Normative ethics focuses on the moral principles that govern what is considered proper conduct; normative ethical theories are the basis for our understanding of ethics in the current business environment (Ianinska & Rocco, 2006). The existence of an organization’s code of ethics is an indication of the company’s cultural climate. Such a code, or standard of ethics, can serve as a measure of the organization’s norms (Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1990). The two approaches most common in a discussion of normative ethics are the action-based approach, which focuses on rules and guidelines that govern employees’ actions, and the agent-based approach, which concerns the fundamental character and motivations of an individual. (Dobson, 2006). With this approach, moral behavior is concerned with the individual and the process he or she uses to pursue “moral excellence as a goal in and of itself, so that ethics becomes central to the rationality concept as an objective rather than a constraint”(p.239). Agent-based approaches are grounded in virtue-ethics theory, wherein the ‘virtue’ in virtue-ethics is a desirable character trait such as courage. The ‘virtuous agent’, according to this theory, is constantly seeking balance in making ethical decisions. The agent does not use rules as guidelines; instead he or she makes decisions that are congruent with excellence and requires using moral judgment which is guided by courage, wisdom, fairness or integrity. Thus, ethics becomes contextual and connected to a specific person and situation (Dobson, 2006), rather than separate and abstract to person and place. Although virtue ethics rejects a rule-based approach, that does not mean, for example, that an HRD training director should ignore the standards or codes of conduct of the organization, but rather that these standards or codes are the foundation from which he or she seeks the professional ideal.

Woodall & Douglas (1999) note that training and development theory, one of the most important theories of HRD, is grounded in humanism; humanism, in turn, is framed by virtue ethics and respect for individual rights and freedom. As an example of a model framed by virtue ethics, Brockett & Hiemstra (2004) offered an ethical decision making model that included critical reflection and consideration of solutions as two of the steps, or variables that impact the decision-making process. To test this model, McDonald (1985) developed a scenario that envisioned a training class of managers and supervisors who question corporate policies and procedure during the training session, and asked HRD practitioners to explain what position they would take if this happened. McDonald found that the practitioners were more committed to the organization than they were to the trainees who criticized the organization’s policies. He concluded that the practitioners in this study were greatly influenced by their personal beliefs about moral obligations (Ianinska & Rocco, 2006).

Moral obligations and moral judgment have been determined to be major factors in ethical decision making. Kohlberg (1969) suggested that an individual’s level or stage of moral development, or judgment, was one of the most important stages in ethical decision making. Rest (1986) considered moral judgment to be an important component of the processes involved in moral behavior, defined as “the moral reasoning process required to identify a morally superior alternative” (Morris & McDonald, 1995, p. 518)). Other theorists argue, however, that moral intent is the greatest determinant of the actual behavior and is, in fact, the final variable preceding the action (Lew, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000; Ajzen & Fishbein (1980). Johnson & Wiswell, (2006) describe moral intent as the individual’s internal decision about an issue. Ajzen & Fishbein (1980), in explaining their theory of reasoned action, says that intent is the result of (a) the individual’s values and attitudes toward a behavior and (b) the individual’s norm, or the social pressure placed on the individual to perform or not perform a certain behavior. Their description of intent is similar to Jones’(1991) explanation of moral intensity.

The Jones (1991) model is characterized by six dimensions of moral intensity: (1) the magnitude of consequences, defined as the aggregate harm done to victims; (2) social consensus, or the legal of agreement about the goodness or evil of the proposed behavior; (3) the probability of effect, or the expected consequences of the act; (4) temporal immediacy, defined as the length of time between the act and its ethical consequences; (5) proximity, or the degree to which the individual identifies with potential victims or beneficiaries; and (6) concentration of effect, the degree to which costs or benefits of the act apply to only a few people. Jones concluded that issues of high moral intensity will be recognized more frequently by individuals. For example, an issue that involves a large amount of immediate harm or benefit to someone close to the individual will be perceived more easily as an important moral issue than an issue of low moral intensity. Weber (1993) tested the Jones’ model; his findings support Jones’ contention that moral intensity is an important construct in predicting and understanding the process of moral judgment. Weber also concluded that two dimensions of moral intensity, specifically social consensus and

the magnitude of consequences appeared to significantly impact moral intensity. The findings of Morris & McDonald (1995), confirm Weber’s conclusions.

### The Role of Intent in Decision Making—A Model

Johnson & Wiswell (2006) note that, despite the popularity of Jones’ model, moral intensity, or intent, has received little attention from researchers, and despite the conclusions of several studies that “moral judgment affects behavior through the establishment of moral intent” (p. 29-3). One of the assumptions upon which this decision making model is grounded is that intent is an essential component of the ethical decision making process.

For the purpose of this paper, we define intentionality as an individual’s internal process of organizing conscious and unconscious values and beliefs, and the means by which these values and beliefs are focused in a given situation to achieve desired outcomes. Intent refers to a conscious or unconscious preference for a desired outcome.

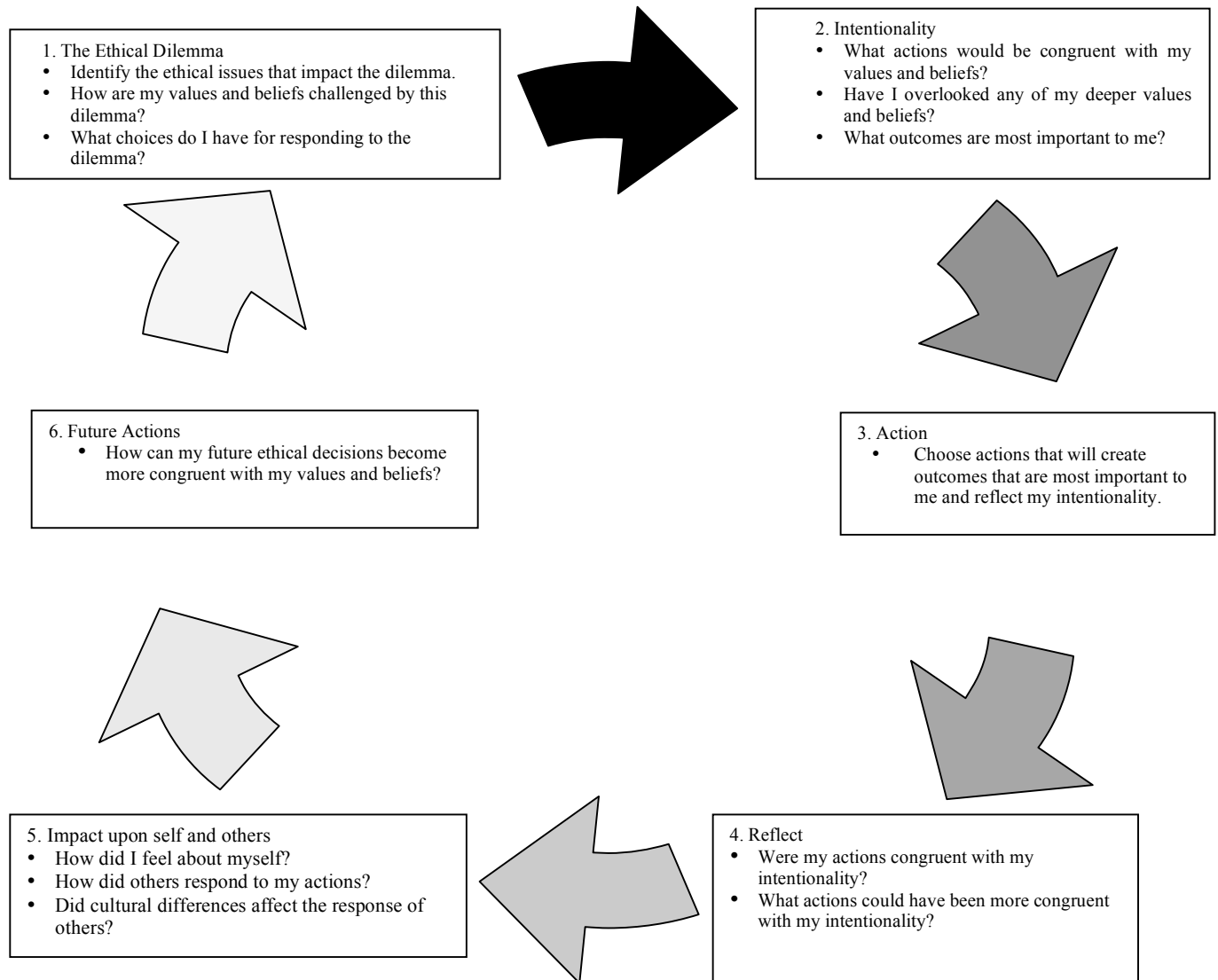


Figure 1. The Ethical Choice Model

## Explanation and Illustration of the Model

The case below illustrates the discovery and learning process that is engaged in each of the six steps of the model.

### 1. *The Ethical Dilemma*

- Identify the ethical issues that impact the dilemma.
- How are my values and beliefs challenged by this dilemma?
- What choices do I have for responding to the dilemma?

Rachel is a senior trainer with Superior Marketing, Inc. Her boss, Daniel, is the new global HR Director and would like to quickly move the firm forward into the emerging global market.

Daniel has asked Rachel to research and recommend a global training company to deliver a pilot for their company to review. After many hours of research, Rachel recommends Cross Cultural Express. CCE delivers its pilot which is hailed as a great success. However, Daniel thinks that the total cost of delivery - \$50,000 is much too expensive and their CEO won't sign on for the series of global training programs. Instead, Daniel asks Rachel to take the training materials CCE left with her and change them to design a program Superior Marketing can use on their own. Daniel feels that there are some good ideas and exercises that are general enough to be used by Rachel.

Rachel is upset by Daniel's request. She knows it's unethical to use someone else's materials; it violates copyright laws and she is certain Superior signed an agreement with Cross Cultural stating that they wouldn't adapt or use the material on their own. Rachel also knows that her boss is on the fast track to the VP of HR position in her company. In fact, she herself hoped to be promoted to Director of Training for all of the work she has done on this project.

Rachel is single and has two young children at home. She cannot risk losing her job and her responsibility, first and foremost, is to her children. But she has always believed it is better to be truthful, to stand up for what she believes in. She also believes in being committed to her responsibilities at work. But she doesn't know how to do all of that in this situation.

### 2. *Intentionality*

- What actions would be congruent with my values and beliefs?
- Have I overlooked any of my deeper values and beliefs?
- What outcomes are most important to me?

Rachel decides that retaining her job and being able to provide for her family is more important than her belief in "doing the right thing" and agrees to adapt the training materials for Superior's use.

### 3. *Action*

- Choose actions that will create outcomes that are most important to me and reflect my intentionality.

Rachel tells Daniel that she will develop a program over the next two weeks to meet his expectations. Even though she has agreed to do this, she feels badly about the decision she has made because she knows it is dishonest.

### 4. *Reflect*

- Were my actions congruent with my intentionality?
- What actions could have been more congruent with my intentionality?

Rachel begins working on adapting the training program but is quite discouraged. She is saddened by her inability to stand up to her boss, and is worried about her ability to really be creative with the materials. It is a very difficult task and she is distracted by her feelings. Rachel feels even worse when one of her assistant trainers remarks that the program looks exactly like the CCE pilot that was presented to them.

Rachel begins to reflect again and re-evaluates the situation – examining what seem to her to be two conflicting courses of action – keeping her job so that she can support her children against her integrity and belief in being truthful. Rachel decides to speak to Daniel and voice her concerns. When she speaks with Daniel, he complains that she has already wasted hours of company time on re-designing this program; he adds that it is not yet done and now it appears to him that she is refusing to do it completely. If she values her job, he concludes, she had better come up with an alternative and do it on her own time so that she does not neglect work on her other important projects.

Daniel's order that she do it on her own time gives Rachel an idea as to how to keep her integrity at work and fulfill her boss's directive. She has two weeks of vacation coming. Instead of taking the kids to Disney as planned, she would use the time to work at home and create a completely new program with new materials that she believes could be even better than what CCE offered in their pilot. She knows that designing new programs is one of her greatest strengths.

She offers this plan to Daniel and he is quite receptive as long as her work is better than CCE's. She commits to making her pilot more successful than theirs. As soon as she makes that commitment, she feels as if all the barriers to her creativity have crumbled. She develops an outline, and brainstorms exercises and cases that would be ideal for

their specific global directions. She even begins to think that this might be a good thing for her career; in addition to her skills as a trainer, she can show off her strengths as a designer.

#### 5. *Impact upon self and others*

- How did I feel about myself?
- How did others respond to my actions?
- Did cultural differences affect the response of others?

Rachel has built greater trust with her assistant trainers who had figured out what was going on behind the scenes with Daniel's directive to steal copyrighted material. She also gained credibility with Daniel because she was willing to use personal time to deliver a product that would be even better for the firm than CCE's. She is able to spend quality time with her kids for two weeks, and has had a great deal of fun with less expense than going to Disney.

#### 6. *Future Actions*

- How can my future ethical decisions become more congruent with my values and beliefs?

In the future, Rachel will think more carefully, reflecting on possible consequences, before acting. She endured some very unpleasant and wasted weeks while she tried to adapt CCE's materials. In the future, after she has gained more confidence and experience, she intends to assert herself more quickly, especially in situations where she has some control over curtailing ethical practices. She promises herself not to be "used" that way again.

### **Importance of Model to HRD**

Hatcher (2002) reminds us that the primary purpose of HRD is promoting change in people in organizations. At times, the responsibility of creating programs and processes for change and growth is given to practitioners who violate ethical principles. HRD professionals must be aware of the ethical policies and guidelines that pertain to their organization and, specifically, to their position. Additionally, they should be able to apply these policies and guidelines on a daily basis. Finally, they should serve as mentors and role models to others. It is our belief that an understanding of intentionality and the role it plays in assisting people to make ethical decisions is essential. For those HRD practitioners who work in environments where ethical principles are not only clear standards of behavior, but, when practiced, are rewarded, a step-by-step detailed model for making ethical decisions is not necessary. For many, if not most professionals, however, it is sometimes very difficult to know which of many options to take, especially if those around them appear to pay little attention to the ethical principles in danger of being violated. Many scholars and practitioners in the field express a commitment to the values and beliefs espoused in AHRD's *Standards of Ethics and Integrity*. To that end, this model attempts to support that commitment by offering a clear, if not easy, step-by-step process toward ethical decision making behavior.

The model, in addition to assisting an HR professional with making ethical decisions, may also be used as a framework for discussions and dialogues, stimulating reflection and new learning within teams and departments as well as throughout an entire organization. Such dialogues and discussions could encourage a climate of exploration and inquiry within an organization that would support a shift away from a more authoritarian climate of control over values and beliefs to a potentially less controlling climate, where an individual's values and beliefs are recognized as worthy material for organizational learning. In the context of encouraging dialogues and discussions, the model could be introduced into a training format, for example, as a module in an orientation program or as a module in a supervisory or managerial training program. Through structured discussions in a training context, participants would be encouraged to reflect upon their role in supporting an ethical organizational climate. The key to the model generating a positive impact on an organization's culture, would of course depend upon using relevant case examples that would have meaning to the organization as well as to the training program participants. Given recent trends in e-learning, the model and a training module could be readily adapted to a very interactive on line training experience. With such an e-learning format, the training module could be used by global virtual teams, stimulating cross-cultural learning regarding values, beliefs and the intentionality of highly diverse global teams.

### **Suggestions for Further Research.**

In testing this model, researchers will address a number of pertinent issues and questions. For example, a qualitative study could investigate the experiences of HRD practitioners working in organizations that have, or don't have, a workable set of policies and/or guidelines for behaving ethically. What is the process through which individuals attempt to make ethical decisions? What are the major barriers and/or supports in these situations? Since there has been very little research on intent, an important question might be: what do practitioners see as the role of intent in making ethical decisions? The Ethical Choice Model has a Normative Framework; its focus is on

what an individual ought to do rather than, as in the case of Descriptive Frameworks, on what the individual does. Normative Models are much more useful in practical situations and, therefore, deserve more attention by researchers. Studies that address the impact of normative models on ethical decision making in organizations would make tremendous contributions to the HRD's purposed of assisting individuals, groups and organizations in learning how to make better informed and more responsible ethical decisions.

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