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Checkmates and ethical dilemmas—both require skill and practice

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A former business student of ours—we'll call him Clyde—faced a small but important ethical dilemma early in his career. At the time, he was a purchasing agent for a major retailer. After a successful effort to rebuild a relationship with a large flatware manufacturer, this vendor sent him a set of colorful flatware for his newborn son. It was a thoughtful gift and worth just \$25, but accepting the gift violated his company policy. Clyde hesitated returning it for fear of damaging this renewed relationship. To make matters worse, Clyde's boss recently accepted a gift from the same vendor contrary to company policy. There was no easy way to return it without drawing attention to his boss's error.

What would you do in this situation? Clyde decided to keep the gift, and he never thanked the vendor or even told his boss about it. Instead, he put the unopened flatware set in a closet at home, where it sat for years. Eventually, Clyde gave it away to a thrift store charity.

According to Clyde, this decision still bothers him to this day. He was scared of offending the vendor and his boss, so he kept the gift, knowing it was the wrong thing to do.

Decisions like this should vex everyone who works in ethics and compliance. Clyde is not lacking in good character, by any reasonable measure—bad character is often how mistakes like this are explained—and we know he had all the knowledge and resources anyone might need to navigate this dilemma—he couldn't claim ignorance—so why did he make this decision?

Because Clyde was lacking *skills*.

This idea became apparent to us in our research for *The Business Ethics Field Guide*.^[1] Using a data set of hundreds of dilemmas that people faced at work, along with how they acted to resolve their dilemma, we identified the 13 most common dilemmas. These dilemma categories, like "Standing up to power" and "Showing mercy," require skilled approaches for resolving them.

Ethics as a skill

During our research, we saw a clear pattern emerge. Clyde's story was just one of many we heard of where people of good character made unethical decisions. The mistakes were large and small, but, interestingly, it was extremely rare that they were made by people you might consider to be unethical.

Hands down, the most common misconception we encounter about ethics is that ethical choices are simply a function of knowledge and character: Good people trained on the right standards are expected to make good choices; bad choices result either from incomplete knowledge or bad character. Instead, the truth is that many

ethical failures happen even when people (1) know what they should do and (2) want to do the right thing, but they lack expertise in *how* to make the right decision. When they imagine the difficult conversation or confront the messy details, their skill sets are no match.

Chess is a useful metaphor. A complete knowledge of the rules and the desire to become an expert don't automatically make someone a skilled player. Chess is incredibly complex; there are more possible games than there are atoms in the known universe! (In fact, there are 10^{123} possible games in chess, but “only” around 10^{80} atoms.)^[2] Playing chess well involves a range of skills, like a mastery of openings, endgame strategies, and checkmate patterns.

Like a game of chess, ethics present complex situations and call for expert skills, like effective communication, wise decision-making, and a mastery of one's values; knowledge of the rules and a desire to make ethical choices are not enough. Luckily, ethical skills are more accessible than the many hours of practice needed to become an expert chess player.

‘Training’ ethics

If ethics truly are a skill, how should that change the way we train ethics in the workplace?

First, we recommend rethinking the word training. In a typical compliance function, training is primarily *knowledge acquisition*, where people are asked to learn about rules and expectations for ethical behavior. But in many other fields, like sports, chess, or music, training means *skill acquisition*. At these trainings, people are asked to practice skills so they can hone them with repetition, reflection, and feedback for improvement. Viewing ethics as a skill means training people through skill acquisition.

Training strategies that consider ethics as a learned skill have been implemented in, among other organizations, the U.S. Special Operations Forces, for which we developed a handbook called *A Special Operations Forces Ethics Field Guide*,^[3] built around real dilemmas faced by special operators like Green Berets and Navy SEALs. The resource offers 13 ethical battle drills that are now being used by commanders and personnel through the Special Operations Forces community, with the goal of maintaining the integrity of our servicemembers as they defend our country.

With this new understanding of ethics training in mind, a few relevant insights can help guide effective ethical training.

Skills take practice

Research in deliberate practice, pioneered by the psychologist Anders Ericsson, shows that skills are improved when practiced under a particular model.^[4] People need repeated experience trying the skill, along with expert feedback. The time needed and the nature of the feedback depend on the skill, but what is indisputably clear is that all skills take practice to improve.

We believe that improving one's ethics follows the same pattern. Nearly everyone begins their ethical training as children, learning by experience which choices are admirable and which are unethical. And as children, we get repeated feedback on our choices from parents, teachers, coaches, and friends. But these relationships change in adulthood, when receiving feedback on our ethics becomes far more rare; people are more likely to talk about us than to us. As a result, our ethical training slows considerably.

What's needed is a practice environment that professionals can use to hone their ethical skills, where they can attempt strategies and get feedback. If your employees only engage with ethics when facing an actual dilemma, it

resembles fielding a professional football team before it has had a chance to run drills.

Mistakes are part of skill development

Skill development also requires space to make mistakes. No one learns a Bach piano piece, a dropshot in tennis, or a new chess opening without making repeated errors in the process. With ethics, however, the stakes for our decisions are much higher than where a tennis ball lands or where a pawn is placed, so we need safe ways to practice and learn.

Dilemma exercises help with this. For example, by using real dilemmas from our research, we provide our business students with impromptu exercises that require them to respond to a tough situation with limited time. We then discuss their anonymized responses in class together, reflecting on which of their strategies work and which fall short. As you might imagine, these exercises become rich learning opportunities that the students remember well after the class has ended. We've helped organizations use a similar approach in the workplace with excellent results.

Progress should be measurable

Skills can only reliably improve if progress is being measured in a reliable way. Over time, a chess student would see the positive effects of practice on their performance in the form of more strategic moves and games won. How can ethical skills be similarly measured?

All of us have made ethical mistakes we would never repeat, but with regular practice via dilemma exercises, there are useful and innovative ways to measure our growing ethical skills. An ethics expert could evaluate responses to ethical dilemmas or catalog evidence of effective strategies that involve creativity, resourcefulness, and communication. In strong ethical cultures, peer evaluation of dilemma responses can also be evidence of improvement over time.

Other benefits of ethical skill development

Training ethics as a skill enhances any compliance program as they are essential regardless of a compliance program's strength. No matter how much time or effort is spent teaching employees about rules, procedures, and regulations, they are sure to encounter a dilemma that is difficult to resolve. Just look at the plethora of ethics scandals in companies with best-in-class compliance programs.

Ethical skills also offer an additional, exciting benefit. Many of the skills that help someone get an ethical outcome are the same skills that make someone a better leader. Hearing multiple perspectives, creative problem-solving, value-driven decision-making, and effective communication all spill beyond ethics into effective leadership. An organization that invests in these skills is certain to see other areas of performance improve in tandem.

Understanding ethics as a skill will prove useful in guiding training and development strategies at all levels of your organization. In fact, it should be part of every organization's ethics strategy, since it reflects the reality that good people—like Clyde—can still make ethical mistakes if they lack the right skills to navigate the dilemma. Once they learn these skills, they will be better able to act in a way that matches their good character.

Takeaways

- Ethics are a skill, not just a matter of character and knowledge. This explains why good people make ethical mistakes.

- Developing ethics skills requires regular training through deliberate practice, similar to how other skills are developed. Dilemma exercises are good practice tools.

1 Brad Agle, Aaron Miller, and Bill O'Rourke, *The Business Ethics Field Guide: The Essential Companion to Leading Your Career and Your Organization to Greatness* (Sundance: Merit Leadership, 2016).

2 Christof Koch, "How the Computer Beat the Go Master," *Scientific American*, March 19, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3yLfht6>.

3 Brad Agle and Aaron Miller, *A Special Operations Forces Ethics Field Guide: 13 Ethical Battle Drills for SOF Leaders* (Tampa: USSOCOM & Merit Leadership, 2020).

4 Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (New York: Mariner Books, 2016).

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