



Love the questions

Columnist: Mandy Lamkin, Enrich Australia director

A few years ago in a key meeting with company executives, my colleague tabled our team's report on which, out of the blue, she had changed the numbers. She also verbally embellished the results in ways that made the situation almost impossible to retrieve.

While I recovered from shock, the questions began flowing: why would she put herself (and me) in this position? What will I do now to tap the fallout? And how will this reflect on me? She's a close colleague, a trusted member of the team and a personal friend. Do I buy into the dishonesty by avoiding the issue, or expose her in a way that could have a devastating impact on us both?

Putting aside for a moment how the situation evolved, for me it was one of the defining moments of my working life because the moral conflict of the situation was so startling. Of equal significance was the loud noise my silent questions made in my head, which made me more conscious of the extent of my dilemma and the depth to which I felt ethically troubled by it.

Questioning, of course, plays a fundamental role in resolving all kinds of conflict; after all, a traditional way of explaining ethics is indeed the question put by Socrates: "What ought one to do?", where the inference is that the solution is more than a chosen course of action. But the important role for questioning is often diminished, even to the extent where many people in business approach conflict resolution by jumping the analytical stage entirely and impatiently focusing on the decisions they have to make in order to get them done and out of the way. In doing so, they more often than not end up with unsatisfactory, unproductive outcomes.

The important thing about highlighting questioning in understanding conflict is that most of the time infectious ethical

dilemmas are more subtle and less obvious than those such as my personal example above. They can be hidden within or behind practices we take for granted.

If ethical behaviour is important to us then we need to learn how to articulate our sense of inner conflict. This self-questioning or reflection also has the potential to help us create a mental benchmark for weighing up how we'll respond to anything that challenges our views – not just the ethical ones.

Regardless of our situation, we're all faced at some stage of our working life with options on whether to turn a blind eye to others' unethical practices or whether we ourselves will cut the odd corner in some respect. While these may seem at the time to be minor, relatively insignificant incidents, the fact is they can build a false sense of normality around behaviour, which may lead to situations with much greater consequences.

The first defensive step is to recognise and personally acknowledge conflict when it occurs. Sometimes this is easy and sometimes interesting. Easy because there are some apparent areas that can trigger conflict more than others, such as hiring, firing, purchasing and calculating bonuses. Interesting because there are also those who would have us believe it's normal and okay to stretch the ethical boundaries in some areas simply because it's gone unchecked in the past. For some, ambition is enough justification for any deed they see fit to fulfil their aims.

Standing our ground on rejecting unethical conduct, however, is an imprint of the times in which we now live. For the most part, thankfully, guarding our principles is important for the majority of us who know we'll lose sleep at night if we do things we find hard to live with.

The fact is no-one, no matter how experienced in their career or sure of their conscience, can know how to automatically

resolve every conflict that appears on their path.

The whole point of ethics is not about always doing the right thing, but understanding how we apply integrity to our attempts to fix the things we could have done better.

It is our ability to be self-aware and question that keeps us honest for ourselves first and hence others.

So, how to prepare for the personal interrogation? Something as simple as imagining yourself in various ethical dilemmas can help with the questioning process and even assist you to come to terms with what general outcome might be most desirable in any case. It also helps you to check in on your feelings and values, and work out how integral these will be in how you construct your responses. This mental workout prepares you for when you need split-second decisions, which is probably more often than you think.

The outcome of the story of my colleague and the changed numbers might have its own point to make. In the end the situation was resolved in a professional way and the figures were reviewed. Our personal relationship, however, did not survive because we both let go of something superficial in its binding that I now accept fuelled the situation – just another insight along the way. Some of my questions went unanswered then and continue to be so. In one sense this is reassuring, in another, I can only think of how I could have asked them differently and more fruitfully when I had the opportunity.

Be encouraged by the presence of questions as they are the groundwork to an authentic response to your dilemmas – the easy and tough choices that equally demand courage and build resilience. Reflection of this kind makes us wise in ways that a life without mistakes and conflict never could. «

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