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Can't We Make Better Decisions to Ensure Ethical Outcomes?

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If we think about unethical behavior, our first instinct might be to point fingers at politicians and governments. But these are easy targets. There are many other examples in which one or more people made an unethical choice by breaking laws or explicit policies. Think about the scandals surrounding diesel vehicles with rigged emissions systems; the water supply of Flint, Michigan; or discredited reports that erroneously link autism and vaccinations.

But there are also important examples in which no explicit law or policy was broken, and yet a poor choice by one or more individuals led to harmful outcomes. Think about the management practices in NASA that led to the Challenger disaster; the creation and propagation of fake news; and how data-sharing by some firms doing DNA testing has weakened public trust.

Frequently poor outcomes result not because of malicious intent or a bad actor, but because a choice was made that seemed right at the time, but later turned out to have unethical implications. This can happen when decisions are made with limited information, insufficient consultation, or inadequate consideration of downstream effects.

Social media provides one of the best and most timely examples. The creators of social media platforms may not have broken any laws, but clearly they did not think through the broader ethical implications of their services, and how these could become platforms for digital misinformation.

We and many others working in academic and professional ethics are asking, “What training, structures, and decision-making skills could lead to better choices and avoid unethical outcomes? And can we structure training and education, either in the workplace or in academia, to help cultivate ethical awareness that leads to better choices?”

We come to this challenge from different but connected disciplines. (Jonathan’s expertise is in the ethics of science and engineering and how that is informed and shaped by emerging digital media. And Steve researches in the field of optical materials – think fiber optics and lasers.)

So although we practice different disciplines, we are both actively engaged in trying to promote the best practices of ethical science through our research, teaching, and service, and trying to pass those best practices on to our students. In doing so, we have thought about and discussed the ethics of research, ethical training, and how standards and perceptions of ethics can vary between students, faculty, disciplines, and national cultures.

Our discussions evolved into a project to help foster a culture of ethics at UCF. We are raising awareness of ethics through workshops, discussions, research, community-building, and other activities. Our goal is to shift thinking across our institution, so that ethics moves from being a second thought to becoming second nature.

The exercise is not limited to students. We are engaging faculty, staff, administrators, and stakeholders across Central Florida, because thinking and training at a university such as ours has a major impact on the entire community. Projects like these can also serve as national models for other organizations.

Ethical challenges are always complicated, so we cannot expect simple solutions. Yet, our work and that of others keeps drawing us back to a simple but powerful finding. There are many commonalities across major moral codes, ethical theories, and value commitments that distill down to something akin to the Golden Rule – and maybe this is the strongest foundation upon which to cultivate ethical cultures.

Faced with an increasingly complex world, and constant challenges to the things we value, organizations that want ethical outcomes may need to develop policies and procedures that focus on “thinking about the other person.”

Then maybe we can all become better, together.

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