

## Ethical decision-making for school leaders

How do leaders in education arrive at their decisions, affecting all their stakeholders?

This question is so important because we live in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, very different from 150 years ago with the factory model of schools.

We believe we could be transitioning to a different type of system, much better reflecting the needs of learners now, Education 4.0. Our view is that institutions acting unilaterally can effect great change locally. This creates the belief in others that they can do the same, so local becomes regional becomes national becomes global – the idea of glocalisation, where universality arises from the particular.

There are huge global, ethical questions in the world that need to be addressed, including power dynamics in educational organisations; lack of education (a third of the world's poorest girls, aged between 10 and 18, have never been to school, according to Unicef (2020)). However, starting with the particular, are there ethical aspects that could and should be considered that would affect what decisions are made and the outcomes achieved?

### **'Proactive' ethics based on positive decision-making involving others**

To date, many decisions seem pragmatic, as if a 'reactive' ethics was in place, underpinned by a 'deficit model' to cause least harm. Interesting that there is no common antonym for 'deficit model'. We are proposing a 'proactive' ethics based on positive decision-making involving others. More will emerge in subsequent articles.

School leaders need to develop a mindset and principles to apply in their own context. However, we would argue that the character of the individual - the development of an individual over time, resulting in virtuous habits or dispositions – may be a very strong starting point. Research by Arthur and Earl, (2020) concluded that overall, the findings offer support to calls for professional ethics to be grounded upon notions of character and virtue-led decision-making' (p.27). A school needs to determine its own framework, considering its vision, ethos and values, against which it makes decisions. There are so many factors impacting decision-making such as short-term thinking; egotism and the abuse of power; lack of capability; perception of both internal and external constraints; individual values and beliefs and paucity of information or information overload. The list is extensive and will be different for each setting.

### **All institutions would state a commitment to such principles - but do they enact them ?**

One attempt at providing a list of ethical characteristics of people holding public office is the 7 principles of public life (Nolan, 1994), created by Lord Nolan in 1994. They comprise Selflessness; Integrity; Objectivity; Accountability; Openness; Honesty and Leadership. These characteristics do not seem contentious. There might be some variation but the broad concepts would generally receive favour. All institutions would state a commitment to such principles (on their websites; in their marketing brochures and in their documentation) but do they enact them? In England, the Ethical Leadership Commission published its Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education (2018) and added 7 personal characteristics or virtues to complement the Nolan principles - Trust; Wisdom; Kindness; Justice; Service; Courage and Optimism

What type of decisions do educational leaders need to make, be it in isolation (unwise) or in consultation and collaboration with its stakeholders? Simply stated an ethical dilemma is a problem in the decision-making process between two options, neither of which is acceptable from an ethical standpoint. Making a change to the curriculum, qualification offer, entry requirements, budgets, the school day, or behaviour policies will rarely be unambiguous; there will be winners and losers.

The consequences of not meeting certain outcomes can lead to ethical compromise. If targets are set arbitrarily to meet a benchmark or demonstrate progress, then individual student attainment must be raised to meet that target. If this is unrealistic, then pressure to compromise is exerted and actions taken that are against our values and not in the best interests of students. However, the situation is more complex as many teachers believe that their responsibility to their learners lies in supporting them to achieve their best but at what cost? Are teachers compromising their ethical and professional values and beliefs to ensure learners achieve against target?

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External influences also impact decision-making. If these pressures are high enough then leaders may act out of fear and intimidation, which may in turn transfer to other staff. It is imperative that external pressures and risks are identified and shared openly. Decisions should also be congruent with the values and purpose of the organisation. How often do we contextualise decisions against the stated vision, ethos and values of the organisation, rather than against the external pressures?

Very few people intend making ethically dubious decisions but value-centred, well-intentioned individuals have made ethically poor and, sometimes, illegal decisions. Pressure to achieve results or financial stability are probably the most significant reasons that otherwise ethically-driven individuals compromise their values and act out of character. However people are motivated to act, there needs to be a system or set of principles against which their actions can be measured and evaluated. An effective starting point would be for schools to develop an ethics policy and guidelines, consistent with the stated mission and vision, outlining, for example: accountability and responsibility; expectations; conflicts of interest and processes and systems that could include whistleblowing. Other policies and guidelines could be cross-referenced, such as equality and diversity; child protection and safeguarding; behaviour and anti-bullying.

**We are proposing a ‘proactive’ ethics based on positive  
decision - making involving others.**

In the next article, we will consider what a school’s ethics policy might include and the range of decisions that school leaders are making now and will be making in the future.

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