

Ethical Dilemmas in Leadership

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Ethical decision making and leadership in Social Work practice often go hand in hand when faced with conflict. Ethics may be defined as “the standards of right and wrong that influence behavior” (Lussier & Achua, 2016, p. 51). This means that the standards could be different in various situations but being ethical is choosing the right decision and unethical is choosing the wrong decision. In many cases, these lines between right and wrong can be blurred based on various factors and making the ethical decision, could also mean making the harder decision. While ethical decisions are often made on the personal level, there are still government laws in place that require people to be ethical such as many financial situations, and non-discrimination laws. Oftentimes, people have reasons that justify their unethical decisions, but that does not make them any less unethical.

Ethics are important, especially in the social work field, because people’s lives are at stake whether that be employees, clients, or the general public. People who are successful, often practice ethically and those who don’t pay the price for being unethical. Some people may believe that karma will provide the necessary consequences for behaving unethically. But, there can be real consequences for making unethical decisions such as, getting into trouble with the law, losing friendships, or even physiological and health concerns (Lussier & Achua, 2016, p. 51). Social Workers have an obligation to behave ethically based on all of the NASW Code of Ethics, but especially in compliance with Integrity, and Dignity & Worth of the Person (NASW, 2021).

People in general are influenced by their own personal gain or various attributes that lead them to making certain decisions. As one develops on their own ethical leadership journey, sound decision-making greatly impacts what kind of leader that person will become. In order to

become a respected leader, ethics should be followed to ensure satisfaction among followers and clients. However, leaders can still make unethical decisions based on what they may gain or lose from a decision, moral understanding of a situation, the situation in general, and various incentives that encourage that leader to make the ethical or unethical decision at hand (Lussier & Achua, 2016, p. 52-53). Oftentimes, ethical decisions are not easy and the consequences of an unethical decision could outweigh the personal benefits. This can affect one's leadership journey in Social Work because in order to become a satisfactory leader, they must be ethical themselves, in and outside of the work environment. One scholar states that the first step in becoming morally courageous to make those ethical decisions in hard situations is self-awareness (Groessel, 2017). This can be interpreted by thinking about how our biases and attitudes impact our decisions each day, and since social workers play an impact in so many other people's lives, they must be aware of where their decisions and reasonings derive from. This is especially true in leadership roles because leaders dictate, and act as a guide for how their followers make decisions as well.

Social workers are faced with ethical dilemmas each day that can have a monumental impact based on how they come to their decisions. In leadership roles, social workers are faced with a range of dilemmas that could seem miniscule or escalate to having serious consequences if behaving unethically. Some examples include a social work student working underneath a supervisor that is making unethical decisions in their practice. If the student refuses to comply with the supervisor they could potentially get fired, but if they continue with the work then they are not complying with the NASW Code of Ethics. Another example could be that a client is refusing some sort of medical treatment that the social worker knows is one of the only solutions. Finally, social work leaders could be faced with the dilemma of removing a child from a parent's

custody or not based on various circumstances. Social workers have the power to make hefty decisions in many of these cases, but they also have the responsibility to make those decisions ethically and with the proper education.

In this scenario, a young social worker started a job at an agency for older teens in the foster care system who are reaching the age of being removed from the system. This agency provides a range of services including support groups, classes on various adulting requirements, mental health referrals, and connections to support outside of the foster care system. The agency is extremely successful, has a large client base, and the employees are very happy. However, all of the employees, including the supervisors, have extremely close relationships with the teen clients. This includes personal phone numbers being shared, hang-outs outside of work settings, sleepovers and dinners at the social worker's homes, and sometimes gossiping amongst other clients and their personal relationships. This makes the new employee extremely uncomfortable but is fearful of bringing this up to anyone for fear of getting fired or shunned in the work place. Also, they think about how since they are not technically a supervisor, then it is not their responsibility to change the environment in which they are now working in.

This social worker applies Sr. Vincentia Joseph and Sr. Ann Patrick Conrad's model titled, "Essential Steps for Ethical Problem-Solving" and the NASW Code of Ethics in order to come to a ethical decision of how to handle this dilemma. First, the social worker determines that this is an ethical dilemma because there is a conflict of interest between services and personal relationships with clients, as well as a lack of respect for boundaries between the two parties. This could also negatively impact termination of services. They then identify the key values involved with this dilemma as being an overstepping of boundaries, confidentiality, Service, the impact of personal incentives and fears, and the question of whose responsible for creating a

solution to the problem (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). The social worker ranks these values as putting boundaries as the most important, responsibility next, confidentiality, and finally the impact of personal incentives. The social worker decides to develop a plan to coincide with how they ranked these values. They study how the agency is run in order to get facts as to why it is unethical and their actions could be more damaging to the clients than beneficial. They then will bring these points to a supervisor and come up with a program that partners these vulnerable teens with responsible adults in the community who would act as a mentor for them as they make the transition out of foster care. This would mimic a 'big brother or big sister' type of program instead of the actual social workers taking them in. In order to implement this plan, the social worker does research on the benefits of these types of programs and how it will set these clients up for more success outside of the agency's control. After implementation, the social worker may reflect on the outcomes and discuss with coworkers how this plan was beneficial and how it may be improved (Joseph & Conrad, 1995).

While ethical dilemmas may seem daunting and impossible at times, there are models like the one used above that make the right decision become more clear. Also, utilizing supervision is a very useful way to address an ethical dilemma. I would use supervision to work with the agency, rather than against it. I see that it is my responsibility to be a leader, even if it is not in my job title or description to do so. During the ethical dilemma described earlier, the social worker had to be a leader in a new agency to support what she saw as an ethical solution to an unethical practice. Social workers must be leaders in all settings in order to fulfill the purpose of our duties and provide the community with the most ethical support possible.

Works Cited

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