Ethical Issues in Building and Maintaining Coalitions— A 10-Step Decision-Making Model for Choosing Between Right and *Right*

Carolyn S. Wilken and Katey Walker

Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences

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2. Carolyn S. Wilken, Ph.D., MPH, associate professor, Family Life, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Extension Services, University of Florida, UF/IFAS, Gainesville, FL 32611; and Katey Walker, Ph.D., professor emeritus, Kansas State University. Portions of this document were adapted from materials developed by the Family Community Leadership program Enhancing Ethical Leadership, initially developed by Donna Rae Sheffert and Marge Hamersley, University of Minnesota, and the author at a workshop held by the Josephson Institute, Marina Del Rey, CA, 1993.

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Introduction

A coalition is a group of organizations and individuals working together for a common purpose. In effective coalitions, organizations share talents and resources to address the complex issues that frequently occur in human services, education, and other non-profit spheres of activity.

Coalitions may be formed to address a single issue or event—or they may be ongoing to address long-term and/or complex issues. A coalition is usually formed when individual organizations recognize that each does not have the people power, technical capacity, or other resources to have a real impact on an issue.

The most successful and productive coalitions function under a formal structure with agreement on goals, time lines, and operating procedures.¹ In these coalitions members discuss and reach agreement on roles and responsibilities of each member, often writing 'job descriptions' to clarify group expectations as to what members are committing to—for themselves and their agencies. Coalitions that work together to establish formal agreements demonstrate an appreciation for open communication to prevent and solve problems.

Coalitions and Ethical Dilemmas

Yet, even with formalized agreements, issues arise that force coalition members to make difficult decisions. Often these are ethical issues, which may involve conflicting personal and institutional values—none of which are wrong, and all are essentially *right*.

Consider this example...

The *Coalition for Stronger Families* is choosing a new board member. Current members agree that it is important for the board membership to reflect the diversity of the community.

Two individuals have applied for the position on the board. One, a Haitian woman, has volunteered many hours for the coalition. The second applicant is a well-respected banker who has been very successful in garnering donations for other organizations where he is a board member. Money for the coalition is very tight, and without significant donations, they will have to reduce services to families.²

- How does the group decide?
- What ethical principles must they consider?
- What process can they use to resolve an ethical dilemma when forced to choose between two 'right' options?

Values and Ethics

Ethics refers to standards of conduct that indicate how people ought to behave, based on values and principles about what is right. Ethics deals with the ability to distinguish right from wrong and the commitment to do what is right.

Values and ethics are not the same. Ethics is concerned with how a person should behave, in contrast to values, which concern the beliefs and

attitudes that determine how a person actually behaves.

Individuals and organizations hold both ethical and non-ethical values. Ethical values are values, which relate directly to beliefs about what is right and proper. Ethical conduct generates a climate of trust that in turn promotes success of the coalition.³

Ethical Dilemmas: Choosing between two 'rights'

An ethical dilemma occurs when there is a conflict between core ethical values, between "right and *right*." There is no one clear-cut ethical choice.

Turfism, or the desire to protect one's organization or 'self,' may first appear to be an ethical conflict. It is important to clearly evaluate the conflict to determine if it is a true ethical conflict, or if it is a case of turfism. Disagreements over the selection of projects for funding or choosing members to serve on a board of directors may reflect turfism rather than an underlying ethical dilemma. Using the 10-Steps to Ethical Decision-Making described later in this publication will help coalitions identify the actual issues.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

Resolving ethical dilemmas often requires a structured procedure to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to provide input. Using a structured process puts a public face on

the decision-making process as the dilemma is resolved in open, guided discussions. Ideally, coalition participants who practice this process before they are faced with an actual right-vs-right dilemma are better prepared to calmly and fairly address emotionally charged issues.

The Josephson Model⁴

Various models exist for guiding ethical leadership and decision-making. The Josephson Model uses the Six Pillars of Ethical Values.

Six Pillars of Ethical Values⁴

Respect

Responsibility

Trustworthiness

Caring

Fairness

Civic Virtue

Josephson's group defines each of the Six Pillars by identifying characteristics of each.

Respect

Civility
Courtesy
Decency
Dignity
Autonomy
Tolerance
Acceptance

Responsibility

Accountability
Pursuit of excellence
Self-restraint

Trustworthiness

Honesty
Truthfulness
Sincerity
Candor

Caring

Appreciation of other
Self after others
Love for people and humanity

Fairness

Process
Impartiality
Equity

Civic virtue

Community membership
Do more than fair share
Community ownership

These six core ethical values or principles provide a guiding framework—which is especially helpful in developing and maintaining coalitions that value diversity. Josephson's group has found that these values have common meaning for individuals or groups who differ in age, gender, family status, ethnicity, educational background, work experience, or many other characteristics.⁴ When coalition members understand what factors (personal vs. organizational benefit, long-term vs. short-term time frames, loyalty to one's own group) impact one another's decision-making, it is easier to address ethical questions.¹

10-Step Decision-Making Model

This 10-step exercise helps to clarify the group's needs and values as they struggle with a

case study.⁴ Using case studies (Appendix A & B) helps participants enhance their skills in identifying and resolving common ethical dilemmas.

This exercise requires active participation by all members. To begin, identify small groups and choose someone to lead the discussion and someone to keep notes on a large flip chart or blackboard so everyone can follow the steps together.

Choosing Right or *Right*? ⁴

1. What is the problem or goal?
2. Who are the stakeholders?
3. What are the options or choices?
4. What are the potential consequences of each option?
5. Is there a right vs. wrong situation to address?
6. Is there an ethical dilemma (right vs. right) to resolve?
7. Is yes, what is it? Which values or principles are involved?
8. How will you rank them?
9. What will you decide?
10. Why?

The following section describes a workshop designed to guide coalitions through the decision-making process.

Right vs Right

Directions for a Small Group Activity³

Before the meeting

- ❑ Print sufficient copies of the case studies (Appendix A & B) so each participant will have a copy of one case study.
 - ❑ Print a copy of the 10-Step Decision-Making Model (Appendix C) for each participant.
 - ❑ Print and cut out one set of 'Six Pillars of Character Cards' (Appendix D) for each participant. Cardstock works best.
 - ❑ Arrange for a flip chart and pens or a writing board and markers for each group.
 - ❑ Be sure the room arrangement allows for small circles of chairs for discussion.
- ❑ Distribute the materials (Appendix A, B, C and D) to each participant.
 - ❑ Instruct each group to select one case study for discussion.
 - ❑ Lead the activity as follows:
 - 1) Ask participants to read the case study and choose 'roles.'
 - 2) Have participants arrange their core values Character Cards in order of personal priority.
 - 3) Then instruct participants to proceed through the 10-step decision-making process. This will involve considerable discussion and negotiation within the group.
 - 4) Have participants re-evaluate their core values Character Cards based on compromises they made in the discussion. How did personal and group values differ? What was 'given up'?
 - 5) Allow 20-30 minutes for the group to complete the 10-Step Decision-Making Model. Call the group back together for sharing.
 - 6) Ask each group to report. Ask about the differences between personal and group core values. Summarize the discussion and lead the group to contemplate how this exercise may help as they face the real issues in the future.

At the meeting

- ❑ Be certain everyone knows one another. Use a get-acquainted activity to help people begin thinking about ethical issues. One option: describe the most ethical person they know.
- ❑ Reflecting on the first sections of this article, offer a brief explanation of the issue: *Choosing between right and right.*
- ❑ Arrange people in groups of 5 or 6. Encourage participants to join groups with people they don't know to facilitate cross-organizational communication. Remind each group to select a leader, recorder and reporter.

References

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- ²Walker, K., Phillips, M., Kahl, D. Leads curriculum notebook. Retrieved August 9, 2003. Available: <http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/misc2/s137.pdf>
- ³Wilken, C. & Walker, K. (2003). Ethical issues in building and maintaining coalitions. Choosing between right and *right*. [Abstract]. *Proceedings of 2003 Annual Leadership Diversity in the New Millennium*. Orlando FL.
- ⁴Josephson Institute on Ethics Retrieved August 11, 2003. Available at <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/>

APPENDIX A

Ethical Case Study #1

Chris is the leader of a neighborhood group of young teenagers. Several youth want to attend summer camp, but do not have enough money. One parent, Gene, has led the group fundraising, but has not been very successful. Another parent, Kelly, calls and is excited to tell you (Chris) that a local business has agreed to sponsor the costs of five kids. They want the kids to come to the business for a day so they can get to know them. Because they make pizza, you know that the kids will be excited about visiting the business and about being sponsored by this company. You remember that the business was recently fined for hiring kids too young for employment.

Is there an ethical dilemma? If so, what is it?

Should the money and the sponsorship be accepted? Why?

Characters

Chris, leader of the group

Gene, parent and fund-raising leader

Kelly, parent

Suzie, youth teenager

Tom, youth teenager

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APPENDIX B

Ethical Case Study #2

The Board of Directors of “Leadership Training for Our Town” needs to select a new board member. They have two applications—one from a single Latino woman who has volunteered extensively for the organization and one from a white male who has a track record of being the best fund-raiser in town. The Board is predominantly white male and has no representation from any other minority population groups in town. They have struggled with fund-raising and would like to get on firmer footing. Because of their by-laws they cannot add a new seat to the Board until their annual meeting which is almost a year away.

Is there an ethical dilemma? If so, what is it?

Who should be chosen? Why?

Characters

Robert, white male businessman and board chair

Jennifer, a female physician and board member

Eugene, an elderly minister and 20-year board member

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APPENDIX C

Ethical Decision-Making Process

1. What is the problem or goal?
2. Who are the stakeholders?
3. What are the options/choices?
4. What are the potential consequences of each action?
5. Is there a right vs wrong situation to address?
6. If yes, what is it? Which values or principles are involved?
7. Is there an ethical dilemma (right vs *right*) to resolve?
8. How will you rank them?
9. What will you decide?
10. Why?

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Respect

Responsibility

Trustworthiness

Appendix D: Josephson's Six Pillars of Character

Caring

Fairness

Civic Virtue