

An Ethical Dilemma

By Lisa Ehrich, Neil Cranston and Megan Kimber

Scenario: Bill is the manager and head of a not-for-profit organisation that provides a valuable service to young people in the community. Mary joined the organisation about six months ago, taking on the position of Assistant Manager. Mary and Bill work closely together and have up until recently enjoyed a very good working relationship. Around two months ago, however, Mary's behaviour started to change. She began to take regular sick days (i.e. one a week), has not been able to meet deadlines for projects she is managing, and regularly loses her temper with the staff whom she supervises. Bill has talked to Mary on a number of occasions but Mary assures him that she is doing the best she can under the circumstances. Without going into any details, Mary has informed Bill that she has some 'personal problems' that she is trying to work through. While Bill feels sorry for Mary because of her personal issues, he also is frustrated by her lack of concentration, professionalism, and commitment to the job. Bill becomes concerned when a member of staff informs him that she saw Mary at the casino (the very same day she phoned the office to say she was sick). It is no secret to people in the office that Mary spends almost every lunch hour at the casino. While Bill genuinely likes Mary and knows she has the potential to be a good worker, he is not sure what to do. Also, he is concerned about the other staff in the organisation, some of whom think he is wrong for delegating part of her load to them on the days she is away.

As a starting point, we have assumed that Bill finds the situation problematic because he believes he faces an ethical dilemma. Please note that there are likely to be a number of options Bill could consider.

Questions

1. Write down some of the possible options Bill could pursue. Which option would you take if you were Bill? Why?
2. What are some of the forces at play that might be impacting upon Bill as he makes a decision?
3. What might be some of the competing forces faced by Bill?



Answers

Q 1 - Possible options:

- Bill could give Mary a warning and help her through this difficult time
- Bill could talk to Mary and arrange for counselling
- Bill could put Mary on diminished work performance and insist she improve her work performance or face the consequences
- Bill could terminate Mary's employment

Q 2 - Possible forces:

- Bill's own sense of right and wrong and his personal values and beliefs
- Bill's genuine liking of Mary and his duty of care towards her as an employee and human being who needs help
- Bill's responsibility as a Manager to ensure all staff perform their job effectively and professionally
- The organisation's culture and whether ethical behaviour is characteristic of the functioning of people in the organisation
- The extent to which Bill has been fair in asking other staff to 'carry' Mary's load
- The attitudes of other staff and stakeholders (i.e. the community at large)
- Policies and workplace guidelines regarding under-performing employees

Q 3 - Some possible tensions:

It is likely that a number of forces or considerations will interact to varying degrees on Bill as he endeavours to respond to the incident.

- Bill as manager and boss (punisher) versus Bill as colleague and friend (This conflict represents justice versus mercy and professional ethics versus loyalty)
- Bill's personal values versus Bill's role as Manager who is accountable to the organisation for supervising staff effectively (this represents personal values versus professional ethics)
- The rights of Mary versus the rights of other staff (this represents an individual's rights versus the community's rights)

Sometimes dilemmas can be very tricky when the options facing a person include equally attractive options, i.e. two 'right' options as in justice versus mercy, and equally unattractive options, i.e. two 'wrong' options with equally undesirable options. If you are interested in reading more about ethical dilemmas, we have included URL addresses for two papers we have published. The first paper is called, 'Public sector managers and ethical dilemmas' and the second is, "Right" versus "wrong" and "right" versus "right": Understanding ethical dilemmas faced by educational leaders.

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