

COMMENTARY

## Ethical tactics

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The focal article “Forms of Ethical Dilemmas in Industrial-Organizational Psychology” by Lefkowitz (2021) builds a solid case for including a paradigmatic-forms level between the ethical-principles level and the manifest-content level of an ethical hierarchical taxonomy. The five forms in this level are designed to be content free, providing descriptions of ethical dilemmas that are independent of manifested situational details. The article mentions the “unsettling” and “disheartening” finding that less than one third of the ethical dilemmas reviewed were resolved positively, but it does not delve into how the paradigmatic-forms level could be leveraged to increase the rate of positive resolutions. The purpose of this commentary is to explore how the paradigmatic-forms level could provide the framework for the development of a taxonomy of content-free, effective responses that could achieve positive resolutions to the five forms of ethical dilemmas.

The focal article describes ethical failure as occurring when an individual faced with an ethical dilemma is motivated to do the right thing but fails to do so. Three causes of ethical failure are mentioned: individual-difference attributes related to moral character, social/organizational influences, and aspects of the situation. However, a fourth cause also needs to be considered: lack of ethical knowledge. When faced with an ethical dilemma, an individual may not know what the right thing to do is or how to do it. In the book *Ethical Intelligence: Five Principles for Untangling Your Toughest Problems at Work and Beyond*, Weinstein (2011) presents the concept of “ethical intelligence,” which involves knowing the right thing to do when faced with an ethical decision. At the core of Weinstein’s ethical intelligence are five principles that fit into the ethical-principles level of the model Lefkowitz (2021) discusses. In his book, Weinstein applies these principles to a number of specific situations outlining specific behaviors that fit in the manifest-content level of the ethical hierarchy. What is missing is a behavioral-response level that parallels the paradigmatic-form level. Content-free behaviors at this level could be considered “ethical tactics.” Ethical tactics can be thought of as general behaviors that are the most effective ways to do the right thing and achieve a positive resolution when faced with an ethical dilemma. Each paradigmatic form in Lefkowitz’s taxonomy could have multiple ethical tactics associated with it.

Ethical tactics could be adapted to address specific ethical dilemmas at the manifest-content level. For example, if an individual is confronted with a coercion form of an ethical dilemma, one content-free behavioral response could be to confront the source of the coercion directly. How the confrontation would look could vary depending on the manifestation details of the dilemma. If the manifestation of the coercion was via veiled threats in an email, then the confrontation could be manifested as a subtle reference to professional standards in a return email. But if the coercion was manifested as a direct statement in a meeting, then the confrontation may manifest as a clear and direct response that the action would violate professional standards.

One reason for the low successful resolution rate could be that people faced with an ethical dilemma may not know an effective way to do the right thing. They may lack knowledge of ethical tactics. By stripping away the manifested details, the five forms described in the focal article could help individuals identify when they are facing an ethical dilemma and understand the core nature of the dilemma. However, even if people understand the core issue, they may not know what actions or responses are most likely to lead to a positive resolution of that type of dilemma. This applies particularly when the base rate occurrence of ethical dilemmas is low for the individual so that they have limited experience in addressing such situations. The development of a taxonomy of effective ethical tactics available to an individual when they encounter one of the five forms of ethical dilemmas could provide the tools needed to increase the successful resolution rate. As the five structural forms are used to research and compare ethical dilemmas people encounter, an examination of the actions people took in the situation and the resulting outcome should be included. Using this data, a taxonomy of effective ethical tactics could be developed. To develop such a taxonomy, research would need to focus on four aspects of the behavioral response.

First, behavioral responses that people employ when faced with ethical dilemmas need to be collected, stripped of their situational specific details, and assigned content-free descriptions. These descriptions may take forms such as remove oneself from the situation, establish an accountability system, report corruption to an appropriate authority, value priority review/reassignment, ignore the situation, or yield to pressure. Second, the resulting outcomes of these behaviors need to be evaluated in terms of how positive they were. This will require establishing criteria for successful outcomes. Is a successful resolution one where the person feels good about the outcome or one where standards were upheld or one where business wasn't lost or some other criterion? An ethical tactic may not be equally effective in creating a positive outcome across the five ethical dilemma forms. A tactic that leads to a positive outcome in one ethical dilemma form may be ineffective or even detrimental in another form. Removing one's self from a situation may be effective within the temptation form but be ineffective in an opportunity-to-prevent-harm form. Third, moderators that may influence the effectiveness of ethical tactics need to be considered. Although it may be difficult to strip moderators of situational details to make them content free, this should be possible to a degree. Content-free moderators may take forms such as a power differential between the parties involved, the scope of the outcome's effects, availability of organizational support, the episodic or ongoing nature of the dilemma, or the shared organizational membership of the parties involved. These moderators could be used to examine questions such as whether the same ethical tactics are effective when coerced by a peer as when coerced by a supervisor. Fourth, it should be noted when the ethical tactic was used. An ethical tactic could be used as a preventative measure before an anticipated dilemma arises, allowing an individual to avoid either facing a dilemma or inadvertently creating one. Some ethical tactics might be used as an on-the-spot response, allowing individuals to deal immediately with unexpected ethical dilemmas brought on by others or by uncontrollable events. Some ethical tactics might need to be employed sometime after an initial encounter with the dilemma, allowing the individual to activate required resources or to assess the degree that the source of the dilemma is engrained in an organization's culture.

Once these four aspects of behavioral responses to ethical dilemmas are understood, then a data-driven taxonomy of effective (and ineffective) ethical tactics could be created for each of the five dilemma forms. Lefkowitz (2021) notes that in practice a situation may involve overlapping forms of ethical dilemmas. Likewise, ethical tactics from multiple forms may be needed for a positive resolution of a situation at the manifest-content level. Inclusion of both ethical dilemma forms (knowledge of what you are facing) and ethical tactics (knowledge of what is the most effective way to respond) in ethics training and the curriculum of graduate programs in industrial-organizational psychology could help increase the rate of successful resolutions to ethical dilemmas.

## References

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