

Reference

Sternberg, Robert J. (2009, April 24). **A New Model for Teaching Ethical Behavior.** *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(33), B14.

Summary

Sternberg suggests that it is difficult for most individuals to translate knowledge of ethical theory into ethical behaviour. To illustrate this point, he describes an informal “experiment” he performed with his undergraduate students. Despite spending the term studying ethical leadership, none of the students spoke up to criticize him when he indicated he was seriously considering some blatantly unethical behaviour.

Sternberg describes the steps he believes are necessary to engage in ethical behaviour or respond to unethical behaviour. He believes that by teaching individuals the model outlined below, and talking about how difficult it is to complete all eight steps, participants will understand how easy it can be to behave unethically and be more likely to engage in ethical behaviour.

Step 1. Recognize that there is an event to react to.

- Individuals must recognize an ethical situation as one that requires their response or critique.
- Often when we hear the beliefs or view the actions of others – especially leaders - we do not see any reason to respond to or question them.

Step 2. Define the event as having an ethical dimension.

- Before we can act, we must first recognize that there is an ethical element to the situation at hand.
- This can be difficult to do when the person acting unethically justifies or defines their behaviour in other, plausible-sounding ways.

Step 3. Decide that the ethical dimension is significant.

- Individuals must not only recognize the ethical dimension to the situation, but view it as significant or serious enough to act upon.

Step 4: Take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem.

- Rather than assuming that the onus is on those in positions of power to do so, we must assume the responsibility to address the ethical issue.

Step 5: Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem.

- Individuals must assess which ethical theory or rule is best to apply to the situation.
- This is especially difficult to do if we find ourselves in unfamiliar situations or surroundings, when it may not be clear what constitutes ethical behaviour.

Step 6: Decide how abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem, in order to suggest a concrete solution.

- Individuals must not only have knowledge of relevant ethical rules, but also be able to apply them to the situation at hand; that is, to possess the ability to translate abstract theories into concrete behaviour.

Step 7: Formulate an ethical solution, at the same time possibly preparing to counteract contextual forces that might lead you to act unethically.

- We must have enough conviction in our beliefs that we are prepared to act even when no one else is speaking up or even seemingly affected by the situation at hand.
- Sometimes doing so is risky, so individuals must decide what they are willing to risk in order to do what they believe is right or good.

Step 8: Act.

- We must take the leap from thought to action.
- Even if an individual is educated in moral theory, has critically thought through the first seven steps and prepared to do the right thing, he or she must simply act.

The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, The Provincial Health Ethics Network