



## *Reasonable Voice*

### **1:00 am Ethics – It’s Usually the Little Things**

When it comes right down to it, most ethical decision-making is rarely concerned with the big things in our lives. We already know right from wrong, and it’s easy to identify the right decision when it’s placed in front of us as a big-ticket item. For example, we know it’s not right to steal the boss’ car at work, or to shove someone down a set of stairs simply because they didn’t pull their weight on a group project at work. To have these things cross our mind is human – but we know better, in part because of the way we were raised, as well as the societal norms and laws that surround us.

No, it’s not the big things that can trip us up. It’s the dozens – hundreds – of little decisions that we make every day that can sneak up on us and challenge our ethical decision-making. How we handle sensitive information disclosed at an important meeting. Whether to charge a social event to a business expense account. How much we tell our own employees about the financial health of the company. Those are the ones we have to keep our eye on.

When you were younger, you’ve probably heard your grandmother say that “nothing good happens after midnight.” Well, I know that my own 20-something kids might argue with that, but the real point is that we all need a clear head to make sound judgments on even the little things – and it gets increasingly difficult with less sleep, more alcohol, and lots of peer pressure. Then the little things take on greater significance.

The idea behind sound ethical decision-making is to have something besides our own gut reaction to guide us. To use methodologies that are learned and practiced over-and-over, so that we develop a kind of automatic, internal guide as we process what we’re about to do... even at midnight.

There are lots of ways to consider ethical decisions – by thinking about the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism); being concerned with oneself alone (utility); considering someone’s rights or our duty to them in a particular situation (deontology). Each of these techniques has a series of steps to be followed, and most consider the alternatives and consequences that come along with a decision, as opposed to simply considering the ends as justification for the means of your actions. But what’s most important is that by learning about these concepts and techniques, we have something else to go on besides our intuition when making those troublesome little decisions that come up at 1:00am... or even 1:00pm.

Your gut is pretty reliable. But take the time to learn new ways to think things through from a broader perspective, too. Your decisions will be better, and you’ll be relying on more than just your gut.

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