

# LAP

# Learning Activity Package

Emotional Intelligence LAP-EI-124

## What's the Situation?

(Reasons for Ethical Dilemmas)

Free lesson module  
courtesy of the

**DANIELS FUND**  
**ETHICS INITIATIVE**

High School Program

Includes activities to use in  
your classroom today!

See inside cover  
for details.

**Ethical dilemmas**

**Causes of ethical dilemmas**

EI:124 Explain reasons for ethical dilemmas (CS)



**MBA Research  
& Curriculum Center**

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## Free Lesson Plan: Reasons for Ethical Dilemmas

Ethics education is a perfect (and needed) topic for all high school students. Thanks to the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative High School Program, you have access to a free library of resources that easily integrate into any course, including lesson plans like this one subtitled *Reasons for Ethical Dilemmas*. The following pages of this booklet are the student handout from this lesson. Use the steps below to get started today and learn how to access the remainder of this library of resources.

### What are LAPs?

A Learning Activity Package (LAP) is a comprehensive, ready-to-use lesson plan designed to help make your preparation easy, fast, and relevant. LAPs focus on developing leadership skills; a positive, career-oriented attitude; and both technical and academic performance. Each LAP module supports and provides instruction for an industry-validated performance indicator. Performance indicators (learning outcomes) are specific work-based knowledge or skills. They specify what an individual worker must know or be able to do to achieve the broad-based work or cognitive performance associated with the performance indicator. These learning outcomes are measurable (can be assessed).

1. Use these in your classroom today:

- The **So What?** section of the student handout can be used as a bellringer and is a great resource for introducing the topic. This section can be copied and pasted on a discussion board to have students read, respond to the questions, and then reply to other students.
- **The Gray Zone** is an ethical case study that can be used to bring ethics into the classroom. The ethical scenario is written at the high school level and often includes experiences that high school students can relate to. Adding the scenario to a discussion board and having students answer the questions, along with responding to other students, is a great way to open up the communication channel for students to share with others.

2. Access the instructor's section of this module within the **Ethical Leadership Package**.\*

3. Like this module? The Ethical Leadership Package includes this LAP as well as 75 more free lessons covering ethics and leadership skills. Skim the subtitles to find those that naturally fit into your courses, such as *Ethics in Digital Marketing*, *Ethics in Entrepreneurship*, or *Demonstrating Honesty and Integrity*. Or consider covering the basics of ethics with these three lesson modules: *Nature of Ethics* (LAP-EI-123), *Reasons for Ethical Dilemmas* (LAP-EI-124), and *Recognizing and Responding to Ethical Dilemmas* (LAP-EI-125).



**Download here!**

4. Visit **[MBAResearch.org/Ethics](https://MBAResearch.org/Ethics)** for dozens of other classroom resources.

\*To measure the impact of our ethics materials, you will be asked to complete a brief survey.



## SO WHAT?

Open up any newspaper, turn on CNN, or check out a news website and you'll be bombarded with stories of people behaving badly. Whether it's fraud, theft, or lying, many people in the world try to get ahead with unethical behavior. But why? What's behind this unethical behavior and the decisions these people make?

There are many causes of ethical dilemmas. You'll face ethical dilemmas whether you're at work, home, or school! By learning about the most common reasons for ethical dilemmas, you can make sure you make the right decisions. Keep reading to learn more about the reasons for ethical dilemmas!

## Learning Goals

A

Discuss the nature of ethical dilemmas.

B

Describe causes of ethical dilemmas.

# What Are Ethical Dilemmas?

## Dilemmas and Principles

Have you ever had to make a decision about whether to cheat on a school project? Or whether you should take something that isn't yours, tell a lie, or accept credit for work you didn't do?



Deciding whether to cheat on a test is an ethical dilemma. Think about it: who could be hurt by your decision?

If so, then you've faced ethical dilemmas. Most of us come up against ethical dilemmas at one point or another in our personal and professional lives. But what makes an ethical dilemma different from a regular decision, such as whether to do extra credit for your calculus class or what kind of new shoes you should buy?

First, let's explain what dilemmas are. A **dilemma** is a difficult situation in which you are required to make a decision. You face dilemmas all the time! Can you think of any decisions you've had to make or problems you've found solutions for recently? Maybe you had to decide which of two colleges you should attend. You would be happy at both, and both have their pros and cons, but you can only be a student at one. You're facing a dilemma.



James Bray/E+

**Ethical dilemmas** involve deciding whether something is right or wrong. In an ethical dilemma, if you pick the wrong choice, someone (or something) could be harmed. If you don't do extra credit for your calculus class, you won't harm your teacher or the other students. In fact, no one will be hurt (except possibly your grade!).

But if you cheat on a calculus test, you can hurt your classmates and your teacher by disrespecting them and passing someone else's work off as your own. Similarly, no one will be harmed if you decide to buy one pair of shoes instead of another. But if you steal a pair of shoes, the store will lose money and employees may be punished.

As we mentioned, ethical dilemmas involve a right choice and a wrong choice. But what makes a choice wrong or right? The right choice involves following certain ethical principles at all times.

**Ethics** are the basic principles that govern your behavior. Always following these **ethical principles** means your ethical beliefs don't change when you're in a new situation. You follow the same ethical principles at school, home, and work.

Take a look at these examples of ethical dilemmas and think about whether you've ever been in similar situations.

- A friend asks you to give them your homework so they can copy the answers. You know cheating isn't right, but you don't want your friend to fail.
- You promise your teacher you'll volunteer for a big school event, but when the day of the event finally comes, you would much rather hang out with your friends. You consider telling your teacher you're sick.
- When the person in front of you in line at the grocery store is paying for their purchase, a \$20 bill falls out of their pocket. You know you should give it back, but you could use the \$20.

These are situations in which there is a right choice and a wrong choice. They're ethical dilemmas because they cause you to think about your ethical principles and decide what the right action is. If you let your friend cheat, you're not helping create a **fair** classroom. If you break your promise to your teacher, you're not being **accountable**. And if you take someone else's money, you're not showing **respect** for other people's belongings. In other words, you're hurting people.



Thinking about all the ethical dilemmas you face on a regular basis may seem overwhelming. How can you make the right decisions all the time? It's important to remember that each ethical dilemma you encounter is an opportunity to make the right decision and show that you can follow ethical principles. So, next time you find yourself facing an ethical dilemma, remember: it's not a *challenge*, it's an *opportunity*!



You can think of ethical dilemmas as opportunities to put your ethical principles into action!

## Summary

Ethical dilemmas are everywhere, and they involve deciding whether something is right or wrong. In an ethical dilemma, if you pick the wrong choice, someone (or something) could be harmed. Following ethical principles means your ethical beliefs don't change when you're in a new situation. Ethical dilemmas exist everywhere, even in your day-to-day life.

### QUICK CHECK

1. What is an ethical dilemma?
2. What does it mean to follow ethical principles?





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## Reasons and Causes

### What Makes a Dilemma?

Now that you have a better understanding of what ethical dilemmas are, let's take a look at a few common causes of ethical dilemmas. We'll primarily use examples from the business world, but remember, ethical dilemmas can happen in all areas of your life! You may think that you would never behave unethically, but you likely face ethical dilemmas every single day.

By looking at the reasons behind ethical dilemmas, we can try to understand why so many people behave unethically—and make sure we avoid common pitfalls like pressure from others, the desire to prove ourselves, conflicting values, greed, bad role models, and a lack of consequences.

**Pressure from others.** Think about it: if you're surrounded by people who behave unethically, you might start to think you should behave unethically, too. In some industries and companies, unethical behavior isn't just accepted...it's encouraged by leaders!

Let's say you work for a company that has branches all over the country. Your supervisor wants your branch to have the best sales in the region, so they encourage you to falsify your sales records. You know that lying about your sales isn't ethical, but you feel uncomfortable defying your supervisor's orders. You're facing an ethical dilemma because your ethical principles contradict what your supervisor wants you to do.

This can happen in your personal life as well. Have you ever been bullied, or have you witnessed your classmates bullying someone else? This is an extreme version of pressure from others. Some people may use bullying, or peer pressure, as a way of pushing others to commit unethical behaviors, such as illegal drug or alcohol use.

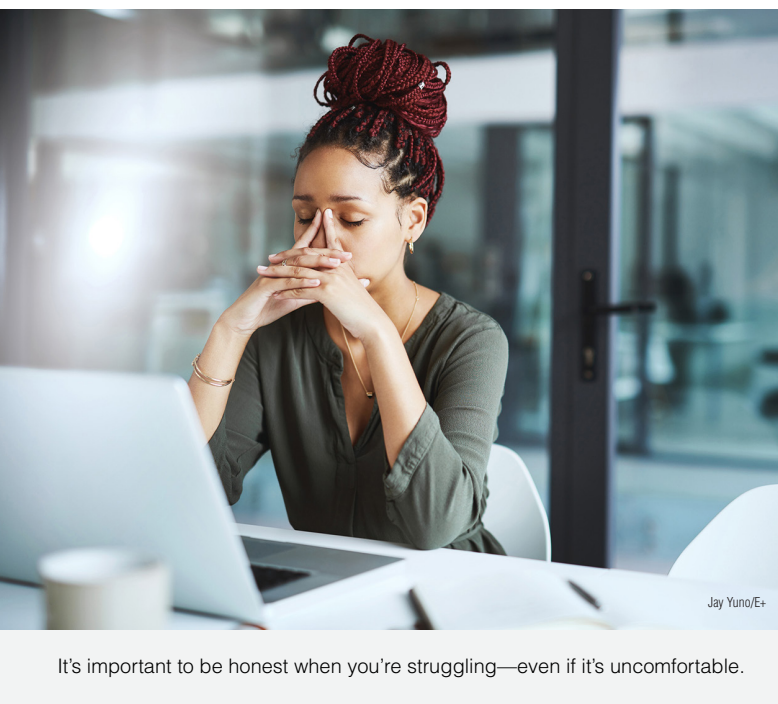


**Dig Deeper:** The Harvard Business Review article "[How Common Is Unethical Behavior in U.S. Organizations?](#)" explores some of the reasons behind unethical workplace behavior, including pressure from supervisors and peers.

bubaone/DigitalVision Vectors

**The desire to prove yourself.** Everyone wants to look good. You want your friends to like you and your manager to respect you, right? This is usually a good thing, but sometimes the need for approval or the desire to help out can lead to unethical behavior.

For example, imagine that you just started a new job and you really want to impress your manager. However, you're having difficulty getting your work done on time. When your manager asks if you've finished your latest project, you might think about lying and telling them that you're finished. You know that this is dishonest, but you may also think that you need to perform well if you want your manager to be impressed. Lying to your manager may temporarily impress them, but you certainly aren't being **transparent**, or communicating openly.



The desire to prove yourself can also lead to ethical dilemmas at school. Let's go back to the cheating example. You probably have a pretty strong desire to get good grades, do well on tests, and impress your teachers, right? For some people, that desire can push them toward unethical behavior. Your ethical principles tell you that cheating is dishonest, but if you're considering cheating to do better in class, then you're facing an ethical dilemma.

**Conflicting values.** You know that being ethical is important, but you also know that not everyone lives by ethical principles. Or, someone may have an ethical code that doesn't necessarily align with yours. A company may have a culture that encourages honesty, but if an employee doesn't think dishonesty is wrong, the entire company may face an ethical dilemma.



Conflicting values can also come into play when people from different cultures interact. Not all cultures have the same ethical beliefs! For example, you probably know that accepting bribes is an unethical method of doing business. But in some countries, bribery is an accepted—and even expected!—part of doing business. And many countries have labor standards that are very different from what you're probably used to. If something that you perceive as unethical is business as usual for others, you might find yourself tempted to make a decision that violates your principles.

Conflicting values may also come up when you're with your friends. Have you ever been friends with someone who doesn't think it's a big deal to steal something small from a store? Your ethical principles tell you that stealing is wrong, but your friend's behavior could put you in an ethical dilemma.



**Dig Deeper:** In [“Talking About Ethics Across Cultures,”](#) Mary C. Gentile explains best practices when discussing some of the factors behind cultural differences in ethics. In what other ways do you think that conflicting cultural values could create an ethical dilemma?

businessDigital/Icon Vector



**Greed.** There's one simple motivation behind many ethical dilemmas: greed. Essentially, people want things they haven't earned, and they'll do anything to get them. Think about the prevalence of fraud in many industries. While greed isn't the only motivator behind unethical behavior, it often makes people contemplate taking things that aren't theirs. Greed can motivate people to steal from their companies, lie to customers, or resort to bribery and fraud.

But greed doesn't always happen on a large scale. Sometimes, people may feel slighted and think they deserve things that aren't theirs. For example, if an employee believes they aren't paid enough, they may feel justified in stealing office supplies or pocketing company funds.

In your personal life, greed creates an ethical dilemma when you see money fall out of someone's pocket. Do you take the money, even though your ethical principles tell you it would be dishonest and unfair?



**Dig Deeper:** *The In-House Ethicist: Is Greed Good?* from the Chicago Booth Review considers the possible benefits of a greed-driven society while still acknowledging that greed can be a poison. What do you think? What examples of greed-driven ethical dilemmas have you seen in the news, movies, or your own life?

bubaone/DigitalVision Vectors

**Bad role models.** Even if your higher-ups don't explicitly pressure you to behave unethically, they can still put you in ethical dilemmas just by behaving badly. People often model their own behavior after their leaders, whether consciously or unconsciously. This can be a good thing, if the role models in your life demonstrate good behavior. But it also means that if leaders are okay with stealing, lying, or other unethical activity, other people may think it's okay to do unethical things, too.

Think about how you would feel if your manager often took money out of the register. You know that's not the behavior of someone with integrity, but seeing a leader do it can put you in an ethical dilemma.



**Dig Deeper:** John Rampton's article, "[The Importance of Having an Anti-Role Model](#)," highlights ways we can learn about our ethical principles even from unlikely places. Have you ever observed a leader behave unethically?

bubaone/DigitalVision Vectors





SDI Productions/E+

**A lack of consequences.** Ideally, you would act ethically even if no one was watching—that's what it means to have **integrity**. But, the threat of punishment is one reason why most people behave properly. What would happen if someone knew they wouldn't be punished for unethical behavior?



## Doing the Right Thing

It's clear that we face ethical dilemmas all the time—at work, at school, and in our personal lives. So does this mean we should simply give up and accept that unethical behavior is unavoidable? Definitely not! Although you'll always run into ethical dilemmas, there are several things you can do to ensure you make the right decisions.

- **Live according to your ethical code**—Keep your ethical principles close to your heart and follow them no matter what.
- **Be your own person**—It can be tempting to succumb to pressure from others, but remember that you're always in charge of your own decisions.

- **Be on your best behavior, even when no one's watching**—Having integrity means doing the right thing, even if no one knows about it.

- **Think about the long-term repercussions of your actions**—What would happen if everyone accepted bribes, stole from their company, or cheated? Think about the **viability** of your actions—how will your behavior affect you, your company, or your school in the long run?



- **Follow the law**—Many ethical dilemmas involve behavior that's not just unethical, but illegal. Staying on the right side of the law is a big step toward practicing ethical behavior.



- **Be trustworthy**—Keep your word, do what you say you'll do, and don't gossip.
- **Respect others**—Remember to respect other people and their property.

## Summary

Causes of ethical dilemmas include pressure from others, the desire to prove yourself, conflicting values, greed, bad role models, and a lack of consequences. You can make ethical decisions by living according to your ethical code, being your own person, being on your best behavior, thinking about the long-term repercussions of your actions, following the law, being trustworthy, and respecting others.



### QUICK CHECK

1. How can pressure from others create an ethical dilemma?
2. Why is the desire to prove yourself a common cause of ethical dilemmas?
3. Explain how conflicting values can cause ethical dilemmas.
4. How does greed cause ethical dilemmas?
5. How do bad role models create ethical dilemmas?
6. Explain how a lack of consequences can lead to ethical dilemmas.
7. What can you do to ensure you make ethical decisions?



# THE GRAY ZONE

You just started a new job as a salesperson for a large company. You like your job and your manager, but you aren't sure about the company's policies. Your manager encourages you to be very aggressive with potential clients. They want you to exaggerate the benefits of the product and push the clients to make a purchase, no matter what. You don't think this is an ethical way to treat your clients, but all the other salespeople seem to behave this way. You want to keep your job, impress your manager, and make your company successful, but you aren't sure about these selling practices. What should you do?

**MAKE IT PAY!**

Think about the last time you faced an ethical dilemma. Was it at work, school, home, or with your friends? What caused it? If you made the right decision, how did you do it? If not, what can you do differently the next time you face an ethical dilemma?

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# Glossary

1. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** The condition of having to answer for or be liable for your actions; accepting responsibility for your decisions
2. **CONSEQUENCE:** The result of an action
3. **DILEMMA:** A difficult situation in which you are required to make a decision
4. **ETHICAL DILEMMA:** An issue in which you must decide whether something is right or wrong
5. **ETHICAL PRINCIPLES:** Standards that govern behavior; not dependent on circumstance
6. **ETHICS:** The basic principles that govern your behavior
7. **FAIRNESS:** The ability to make judgments and act without favoritism or self-interest; engaging in fair competition and creating equal relationships
8. **INTEGRITY:** Adhering to an established set of personal ethics and sound moral principles; acting with honesty in all situations
9. **RESPECT:** Regard or esteem; honoring the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others
10. **ROLE MODEL:** A person whose behavior is imitated by others
11. **RULE OF LAW:** Complying with laws and regulations
12. **TRANSPARENCY:** The quality of being just as one seems; being open and truthful when communicating
13. **TRUSTWORTHY:** Reliable; deserving the confidence of others
14. **VIABILITY:** The long-term value of your choices and actions