The PLUS Ethical Decision-Making Model

Making a decision when faced with an ethical dilemma can be overwhelming and complex. Following a model can help an individual to remain objective. An ethical decision-making model assists the clinician in following a blue-print and structured model to find the best solution possible. One example of an ethical-decision making model is called the "PLUS" model.

We group the considerations into the mnemonic PLUS.

- **P** = Policies
  Is it consistent with my organization's policies, procedures and guidelines?
- **L**= Legal
  Is it acceptable under the applicable laws and regulations?
- **U** = Universal
  Does it conform to the universal principles/values my organization has adopted?
- **S**= Self
  Does it satisfy my personal definition of right, good and fair?

Step 1: Define the problem
The most significant step in any decision-making process is to determine why a decision is called for and identify the desired outcome(s). How you define a problem shapes your understanding of its causes and where you will search for solutions.

First, explore the difference between what you expect and/or desire and the current reality. By defining the problem in terms of outcomes, you can clearly state the problem.

How you define the problem determines where you go to look for alternatives/solutions-- so define the problem carefully.

Step 2: Seek out relevant assistance, guidance, and support
Once the problem is defined, it is critical to search out resources that may be of assistance in making the decision. Resources can include people (i.e., a mentor, coworkers, external colleagues, or friends and family) as well professional guidelines and organizational policies and codes. Such resources are critical for determining parameters, generating solutions, clarifying priorities, and providing support, both while implementing the solution and dealing with the repercussions of the solution.

Step 3: Identify available alternative solutions to the problem
The key to this step is to not limit yourself to obvious alternatives or merely what has worked in the past. Be open to new and better alternatives. Consider as many as solutions as possible -- five or more in most cases, three at the barest minimum. This gets away from the trap of seeing "both sides of the situation" and limiting one's alternatives to two opposing choices (i.e., either this or that).

Step 4: Evaluate the identified alternatives
As you evaluate each alternative, identify the likely positive and negative consequence of each. It is unusual to find one alternative that would completely resolve the problem and is significantly better than all others. As you consider positive and negative consequences, you must be careful to differentiate between what you know for a fact and what you believe might be the case. Consulting resources, including written guidelines and standards, can help you ascertain which consequences are of greater (and lesser) import.

You should think through not just what results each alternative could yield, but the likelihood it is that such impact will occur. You will only have all the facts in simple cases. It is reasonable and usually even necessary to supplement the facts you have with realistic assumptions and informed beliefs. Nonetheless, keep in mind that the more the evaluation is fact-based, the more confident you can be that the expected outcome will occur. Knowing the ratio of fact-based evaluation versus non-fact-based evaluation allows you to gauge how confident you can be in the proposed impact of each alternative.

Step 5: Make the decision
When acting alone, this is the natural next step after selecting the best alternative. When you are working in a team environment, this is where a proposal is made to the team, complete with a clear definition of the problem, a clear list of the alternatives that were considered and a clear rationale for the proposed solution.

Step 6: Implement the decision
While this might seem obvious, it is necessary to make the point that deciding on the best alternative is not the same as doing something. The action itself is the first real, tangible step in changing the situation. It is not enough to think about it or talk about it or even decide to do it. A decision only counts when it is implemented. As Lou Gerstner (former CEO of IBM) said, "There are no more prizes for predicting rain. There are only prizes for building arks."

Step 7: Evaluate the decision
Every decision is intended to fix a problem. The final test of any decision is whether or not the problem was fixed. Did it go away? Did it change appreciably? Is it better now, or worse, or the same? What new problems did the solution create?

Reference: Ethics & Compliance Initiative (ECI). (2021, October 25). *The Plus Ethical Decision-Making Model - Ethics & Compliance Toolkit*. Ethics and Compliance Initiative. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from https://www.ethics.org/resources/free-toolkit/decision-making-model/