

## Ethical Reasoning in Action: Using 8 Key Questions to Facilitate Group Decision-Making

### Background

College students face increasingly complex decisions as they graduate and join the workforce and their communities. Often these decisions have ethical complexities and implications and require sophisticated reasoning abilities. Decisions made by individuals played a large role in the recent crises in the banking and mortgage industries, the wars in the Middle East, the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore while in police custody, and the resulting violence in the aftermath of his death.

At our university the framework for this ethical reasoning is through the use of 8 Key Questions (8 KQs) that focus on **Fairness** (how can I act equitably and balance all interests?); **Outcomes** (what are the short-term and long-term outcomes of possible actions?); **Responsibilities** (what duties and obligations apply?); **Character** (what actions will help me become my ideal self?); **Liberty** (what principles of freedom and personal autonomy apply?); **Empathy** (how would I respond if I cared deeply about those involved?); **Authority** (what do legitimate authorities — experts, law, my god[s] — expect of me?); and **Rights** (what rights — innate, legal, social — apply?).

### The intended course

Fundamental Human Communication: Presentations, a basic human communication course in the General Education Program.

### Activity goal

The goal of the activity is to provide students with a framework or a reasoning process they can use with ethical situations.

### Activity objectives

1. When given a specific decision and rationale on an ethical issue or dilemma, students will correctly identify the Key Question most consistent with the decision and rationale.
2. Given a specific scenario, students will identify appropriate considerations for each of the 8 Key Questions. Alternate approach: Students will be able to provide the specific considerations raised or rationale implied when applying every Key Question to an ethical situation or dilemma.
3. For a specific ethical situation or dilemma, students will evaluate courses of action by applying (weighing and, if necessary, balancing) the considerations raised by Key Questions.

### Rationale

It is important to teach college students not just about their personal and professional ethical code but also about how to apply ethical reasoning skills to evaluate such issues individually and collaboratively. Since the convention theme is “[R]evolution,” this activity is designed for students to use public space to talk and deliberate about an ethical situation.

### Procedures

1. Have students read a short case study or scenario (I have included a case study that I wrote).
2. Introduce students to a circle process for discussing ethical situations.
  - A. Have the students break up into smaller groups and encourage each group to sit in a circle. Hand out the talking pieces (these can be tokens of some kind).
  - B. Establish some expectations for the ethical reasoning process (e.g., turn cell phones off, use the talking piece, and engage in active learning).
  - C. Rules for using the talking piece:

- 1) Tell students that whoever is holding the talking piece is the only one who should be speaking. The other members of the group should actively listen to the speaker.
  - 2) Students should pass the talking piece around the circle and share their thoughts related to the 8 Key Questions and the scenario.
  - 3) Students always have the right to pass the talking piece to someone else.
- D. Tell students that the circle is a safe space to question assumptions and to challenge others in a respectful way. It is a space for openly sharing thoughts and experiences.
  - E. Ask students to take this task seriously and use the 8 Key Questions to make the best possible decision together.
3. Use multiple rounds to help students understand and apply the 8 Key Questions to the scenario. Here is what could be done in these rounds:
- A. Round 1: Give students 3 minutes to reflect individually on the 8 KQs and apply them to the scenario. Have each student determine which key questions are most relevant for this scenario. In the circle, have each person share which of the key questions they think are most relevant for this scenario and have them explain why. After everyone has had a chance to share using the talking piece, have the group decide what three questions most apply to this scenario. Each group should be prepared to share their top three questions and tell the other groups why they chose those three questions.
  - B. Round 2: Have the groups discuss which questions were the most important. Each group must come up with an answer and be prepared to share. Have groups report out what they would do in each scenario and explain why. Encourage the groups to reflect on how their answers match up with the 8 KQs – why did they choose to do what they did based on the 8 KQs?
  - C. Round 3: Have the groups discuss whether using the 8 KQs changed their considerations and the discussion about this scenario.

### **Typical results**

Some groups spend a great deal of time discussing which one of the 8 Key Questions is most relevant to the scenario and why. Oftentimes they will agree that there are three questions that are most relevant to the scenario being discussed. Other groups spend less time discussing the key questions and move more quickly to making a decision. It is difficult to determine in advance which groups will be more deliberative and which groups will be more decision-driven.

### **Debriefing the activity**

After groups have reported what they would do, move from asking, "What would you do?" to the more challenging, "What is the right thing to do, if there is a right thing to do?" Asking "What makes it right or not?" brings the 8 Key Questions into play and demonstrates the reflective nature of the ethical reasoning process.

### **Scenario**

Hobbies Galore is a privately owned company that was started in 1975 by Jon and Joan Black. They began making picture frames in their garage and within three years the Blacks had opened their first 300-square foot store in Little Rock, Arkansas. Since 1978, Hobbies Galore has opened over 700 stores across the United States; the average store is now 60,000 square feet and offers more than 70,000 arts, crafts, hobbies, home decor, holiday, and seasonal products. Hobbies Galore is included in Forbes Magazine's list of the largest privately owned companies in the United States.

Jon and Joan Black are born-again Christians. Inspired by the rapid growth of their business and the major life changes that ensued, they re-committed to their faith in 1980. On their website they include statements about their beliefs and their obligations to their employees and customers:

“We believe that it is by God's grace and provision that Hobbies Galore has endured. God has been faithful in the past, and we trust Him for our future. We are dedicated to

- Honoring the Lord in all we do by operating the company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles.
- Offering our customers exceptional selection and value.
- Serving our employees and their families by establishing a work environment and company policies that build character, strengthen individuals, and nurture families.
- Providing a return on the family's investment, sharing the Lord's blessings with our employees, and investing in our community.”

David Montgomery is a senior vice president with the company. He has been with the company since 1978, when he was hired to be the manager of the second Hobbies Galore store. Montgomery and his partner of 25 years, Rick Cornelius, have been asked to be the Grand Marshals in a gay pride parade in Little Rock. Even though the company prohibits employees from taking part in “public demonstrations in favor of or opposed to a cause,” Montgomery, who is godfather to the Black’s oldest son, sought permission from the Blacks to appear in the parade with Cornelius as a celebration of their long-term relationship.

After talking and praying together, the Blacks have sought legal advice from the company’s attorney who is a member of their church. They have also consulted with their pastor and other senior leaders in their congregation.

What do you think the Blacks should do about Montgomery’s request to participate in the gay pride parade? Please note that you’re not being asked to provide advice from a legal or religious perspective; rather, you’re being asked to share your thoughts based on your understanding of the 8 Key Questions as they apply in this particular situation.

Note: Depending on how you want this GIFT presented, I may need access to a computer and a projector.