Helping Groups Make Ethical Decisions

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Suppose you are the chief executive of XYZ, Inc. You have much to think about. Competitors bring new technology to market. Raw material costs rise as the dollar's value falls. Union leaders worried about reelection start "get tough" campaigns. Congress passes laws like the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. It's no wonder you have ulcers.

Then there's ethics. If you talk about it, you might start people thinking. Maybe they'll decide your firm is unethical, even though nobody agrees on what "unethical" means. You foresee bad publicity and lawsuits. You see valuable business relationships being destroyed.

Ethics is the nuclear waste of the executive suite. It's dangerous, it's always there, and nobody is sure what to do with it. The fear is well-founded. Almost any behavior can be labeled unethical. Give to the poor? You are encouraging dependency. Buy a cup of coffee? You should have made sure it's Free Trade coffee, so third world farmers get a fair price.

Our society does not have a shared view of how a reasonable, well-intentioned person can live an ethical life. We don't talk enough about the difference between intentional malfeasance, and the normal frictions of living in a world none of us fully understand. Our reticence lets demagogues insist on unachievable standards. Perversely, it also helps charlatans use moral language to justify unethical acts.

Return to the scenario for a moment. Suppose you wanted to infuse practical ethics in XYZ, Inc. What would you actually do? You might create an ethics policy, consulting owners, employees, and other stakeholders. You would train employees in using the policy. You would use it yourself. You would reward behavior consistent with the

policy, and punish transgressions. You might set up an internal whistle blower system, so employees could report policy violations anonymously.

These are all good ideas, but they address the context of ethical decision making, not the decision process itself. Ethics policies set general directions, but must be interpreted for specific cases. Training prepares people to some extent, but there is often a gap between classroom work and the real world. Reward systems motivate good decision making, but they won't help employees actually make good decisions. Anonymous reporting identifies decision process failures, but it would be better to avoid problems in the first place. Can information technology (IT) help with the things people actually do when making ethical decisions?

This paper introduces Dioptra, a system designed to help teams make difficult ethical choices. The software helps decision makers (DMs) structure their work, adding discipline to an often chaotic process. It helps them talk about things openly, even when the boss is on the team. Dioptra helps them explain their decision to others, automatically generating presentations from the work they have done. Physical location is irrelevant; a team can be distributed across the world.

The software is designed so that DMs know they are responsible for their work. The system does make advice available on everything from philosophy to group dynamics. However, Dioptra forces DMs to be conscious of their work processes. They are in total control. If they fail, they cannot claim, "The computer made me do it."

Dioptra was designed for businesses, but schools and universities can use it too. These organizations often have little money, and limited access to IT expertise. Dioptra

servers can be hosted commercially for as little as $10 per month. The software is easy to deploy and administer.

This paper shows how a team uses Dioptra to make a difficult choice. But first, why is ethics so difficult?

The Trouble with Ethics

Compare ethics with another topic, like computer programming. Programmers accept some basic principles. For instance, the vast majority think that object-oriented programming is a good idea. There is less agreement about whether Ruby is better than Java, but the issue is peripheral to programming's core ideas. In contrast, ethicists don't even agree on basic terms like "good" and "bad," let alone decision making processes. This is despite more than 2,000 years of ethical writing.

Why the difference? One reason is that ethics is mixed up with everything we do. A devout Christian lives the Ten Commandments. Aristotelians strive for courage, the golden mean between rashness and cowardice. These positions affect the way people raise children, choose careers, spend money, and vote. Some ethical disagreements reflect the way people define humanity itself. Are we sparks of the divine? Are we smart animals with selfish genes? Compared with these differences, the Ruby vs. Java debate is trivial.

Another problem is that *nobody* reading these words could supply ethical rules predicting his or her behavior in every situation. Ethical choices are affected by culture, family, education, social circle, cognition, genetics, the details of situations, … It isn't feasible to create a usable, predictive formal system from this mare's nest of effects.

If each person is a node of ethical chaos, what happens when groups try to do ethics work? For many people, challenging their ethics is tantamount to challenging their worthiness as human beings. Valuable relationships can be damaged. Even violence can ensue. In contrast, while programmers argue, nobody has branded Ruby's creator Yukihiro Matsumoto a heretic. Nobody is trying to blow him up. As far as I know.

The Challenge

How can managers help employees (and students, citizens, etc.) make good ethical decisions? "Good" is used in a process sense. Mathieson (2007) wrote that an ideal process:

> applies **articulated moral ideas**, is **disciplined**, is **not affected by individual or group biases**, has **not been manipulated**, is **consistent with organizational values**, **improves relationships**, **helps DMs learn**, is **inexpensive**, can be **documented**, and can be **reused**.
>
> Mathieson (2007)

"Disciplined" means that DMs apply the same mix of ethical analyses, such as utilitarianism ("the greatest good for the greatest number"), duty, divine command, etc. to every option they consider.

Of course, this "ideal process" is something to be approached, rather than achieved. Reality has a way of interfering. For example, DMs' individual goals bias decision projects. When someone yearns for the spotlight, meetings can be competitions for attention. Status affects decision projects as well. If a high status DM signals a preference for a certain action, there may be no point in evaluating other options. Existing

philosophical commitments also come into play. For example, the Calvanist view of human nature is at odds with the Roman Catholic position, which can affect the way DMs evaluate actions.

Doing ethical work with others requires skill. Ideal team members are good at role taking, that is, understanding an issue from someone else's perspective (Moberg, 2000). They are mindful, or aware of their own often visceral reactions to others (Langer, 1989). They possess self-control, and can redirect inappropriate emotional reactions. The very best team members not only possess these attributes themselves, but can help others develop them. Again, this is an ideal to be approached, rather than a realistic expectation.

Good DMs also realize the impossibility of full ethical consistency. *Everyone* can be labeled a hypocrite. There will always be a behavior in one aspect of a person's life that is arguably inconsistent with an ethical principle. Good DMs do not expect full consistency from themselves, or from anyone else. In ethics, consistency is a matter of degree.

Turning from individuals to decision context, we know that companies affect employee's ethical goals. For example, purchasing agents are more likely to cheat when under pressure to meet difficult targets (Robertson and Rymon, 2001). The law is recognizing the importance of decision context. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act holds managers accountable for illegal behavior by employees, even if the managers did not know about the behavior. Manager who create business systems that encourage crimes, without adding commensurate control mechanisms, may earn fines and jail time.

Organizational culture is also important. Company norms restrict what people are willing to talk about. For example, an Oakland University student asked engineers at a

large American automobile manufacturer about advances in fuel efficiency. She was told repeatedly that "we don't talk about that here." Such norms can lead to the Abilene paradox (Harvey, 1988), where everyone wants to take a certain action, but nobody is willing to say so.

What does all this mean in practice? The manager's challenge is to create a firm that rewards ethics, selects people who want to practice ethics, and helps them develop the skills they need to do so. The manager should ensure that talking about ethics is at least allowed, and hopefully encouraged. Naturally this will create conflict, so the firm also needs mechanisms for reducing conflict's destructive effects. Earlier, we listed concrete things managers can do about ethics: write a shared ethics policy, promulgate it, use it themselves, etc.

Dioptra is designed for companies that have made this effort. The rest of the discussion assumes such an environment. The cynic may suggest that few companies meet this criterion. The cynic is probably right. We will return to this issue later.

The Software

Let's use another fictional scenario. AlVac makes a profitable line of antiallergenic vacuum cleaners in the small rural city of Spring Ridge, Ohio. AlVac is the only large employer in the city. Spring Ridge supports the company with tax breaks, customized high school training programs, and the yearly Dust Sucker parade.

AlVac's main customer is the large retail chain Xam, which buys 30% of AlVac's output. Xam recently demanded a 25% price cut over the next three years, or it would

drop AlVac. The only way to do this is to use lower quality parts, and move production overseas. This would devastate Spring Ridge's economy.

A team was formed to consider the problem. It included people in locations across the country. The team's first meeting was face-to-face. They agreed to conference calls for future meetings, and to use Dioptra to organize their work. Given the sensitive nature of the discussion, each team member agreed to keep everything confidential.

The most valuable thing Dioptra will do is help the team structure their work. For people used to making ethical choices based on gut feel, it might not even occur to them that ethical problem solving *can* be structured to some extent. This might be a revelation just in itself. Consciously structuring their work process will help the team be more complete and consistent in, for example, evaluating each action the company might take. Adding structure also helps DMs focus on one part of the problem at a time.

Figure 1 shows the structure of a Dioptra project. The sections are:

- Elaboration: understand the situation, perhaps identifying stakeholders, evaluation criteria, and actions that could be taken.
- Analysis: compare the actions using evaluation criteria. Dioptra does not insist on just one type of criterion. DMs can mix-and-match utilitarianism, duty, virtue ethics, divine command, and so on, in whatever combination they choose. They can also use heuristics, like "Would you like to see your decision in the news the next day?"
- Choice: identify the action(s) to be taken.

- Consequences: tell a "future story" of how the selected actions may play out over time. One way people handle complexity is to ignore the details of a situation, just focusing on issues they think are important. That is what happens in the analysis phase. Telling a future story puts the selected actions back in context. It may help DMs identify important issues they had previously ignored.
- Explanation: explain the decision to others.

Dioptra does not force DMs to use the steps in Figure 1 in any particular order, or even use them at all. Much like a spreadsheet, Dioptra gives DMs an empty structure which they decide how to fill. DMs drop the tools they need in each of the sections. There are five tools currently:

- Editor: a general purpose text editing tool used to, for example, explain the team's position on an issue.
- Brainstormer: helps the team generate ideas. All contributions are anonymous.
- Discussion: a simple discussion forum. Messages can be anonymous or attributed.
- Grid: helps the team compare actions (limited to the analysis section).
- Presenter: helps the team present their work to others (limited to the presentation section).

Teams use as many instances of the tools as they want. If the members of one team agreed on what the situation was, they might simply drop an editor into the elaboration section, and describe what was happening. If the members of a different team weren't so sure about the situation, they might use a discussion tool to talk about it. Once they had reached a shared understanding, they might then add an editor. It is up to the DMs to

decide how they will go about making a decision. This "toolbox" approach forces DMs to remain aware of their work processes.

Dioptra helps DMs focus on the situation at hand. It is not a tool for general philosophical debate. Limiting the discussion's boundaries may help DMs resist the temptation to reach for complete ethical consistency across all aspects of life. As noted above, this is impossible. Some consistency is desirable, of course. For example, the DMs might use the same criteria to evaluate each of the actions they are considering. The grid tool encourages such consistency (although DMs are still free to do whatever they want), but only within a particular decision project.

Dioptra's focus on the immediate problem might lead to principles being used consistently *within* situations, but not *across* situations. This is where a company-wide ethics policy can help. It can specify overriding principles that unify the company's actions. Further, since DMs explicitly structure their work when they use Dioptra, their analytic framework can be reused for similar cases.

The toolbox approach gives Dioptra another important attribute: all project data is kept in one place. Often, data for a decision project is split across email, files on PC hard disks, chat records, wikis, etc. Dioptra splits up the technology rather than the project. DMs add tools as they need them; a discussion tool for this question, another for that question, an editor here, a brainstormer over there. However, everything is collected within the structure shown in Figure 1. There is just one instance of the structure on a single server. All DMs see the same information, all of the time.

This also makes security easier. The Dioptra client does not store any project data itself. It sends everything to the server. Losing a laptop with the client on it will not compromise the project. All data transfer is, of course, encrypted.

Let's go back to the scenario. In their initial meeting, the AlVac group agreed on what the situation was, and who the stakeholders were: customers, employees, shareholders, and the Spring Ridge community. In their next conference call, they decided to focus on the effects of their decision on stakeholders, that is, to use utilitarianism.

The AlVac team used a brainstormer to list the actions the company might take. After discussion, some via conference call and some using Dioptra, they agreed that the actions they would choose from were:

- Move all production to China, and use cheaper parts.
- Use two production lines, one in China for Xam, and the other in Spring Ridge.
- Negotiate better terms from Xam.
- Refuse Xam's terms, and replace the lost sales.

Figure 2 shows part of the grid they created next. After one more conference call and a Dioptra discussion, the team made a choice, and used an editor to document it (Figure 3).

The team presented its recommendation to top management. Dioptra can automatically create a PowerPoint-like presentation from the work the group has done. DMs select which editors, brainstormers, and so on they want in the presentation, enter a title, subtitle and byline, and Dioptra creates the presentation.

Conclusion

Ethics has preoccupied our species at least since the beginning of recorded history, and perhaps well before that (Wright, 1995). As both technology and our understanding of ethical decision making improves (e. g., Johnson, 1993), we can build tools that past generations could not even imagine. ACM members may be among the toolmakers who help change ethical practice in business, government, education, and other domains.

Who will use Dioptra? The prospect of being intentional about ethics no doubt frightens many business executives. My guess is that most are not up to the challenge, and for good reason. Promoting ethics might be a career killer, especially in companies where "loyalty" is to the boss, rather than to any principles.

Dioptra was built for the exceptions. Perhaps you and your company (or school, university, church, etc.) want to be among those who take ethics seriously. You have much work to do, some of it unpleasant. Dioptra may help.

Educators can use Dioptra to help people develop the skills needed for practical ethics. There may be a virtuous circle here. Suppose well-intentioned, mindful people take ethics training, and become more skilled. Dioptra becomes more useful to them, because it amplifies their improved abilities. They use the tool, learn more about ethics, and Dioptra becomes even more useful. And so on.

Dioptra will not make people or companies virtuous. All it does is make practical ethics easier, helping those who *value* ethics be better at *doing* ethics. It can help companies make ethics part of normal business practice.

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Figure 1. Problem Structure

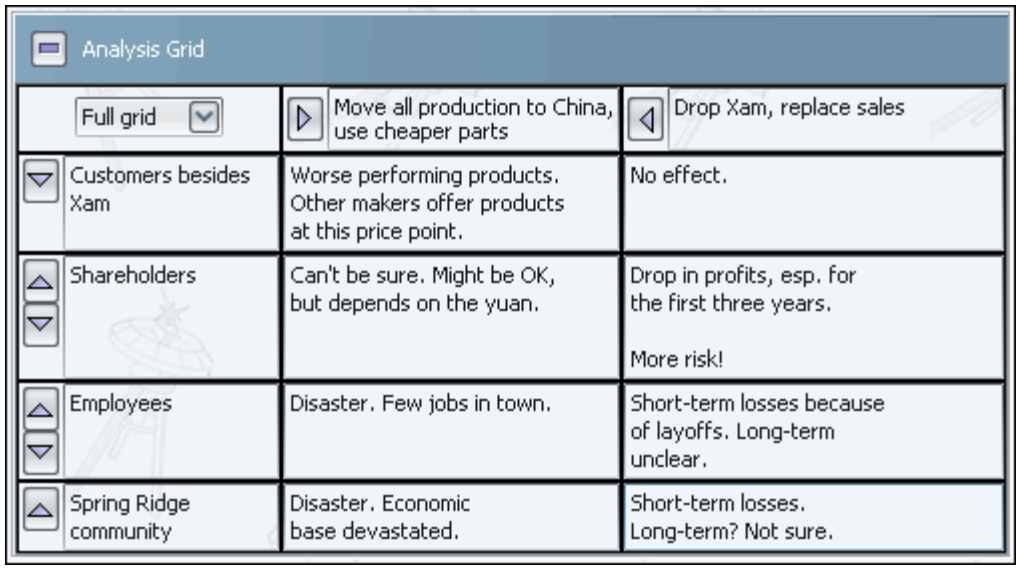

Figure 2. Analysis Grid

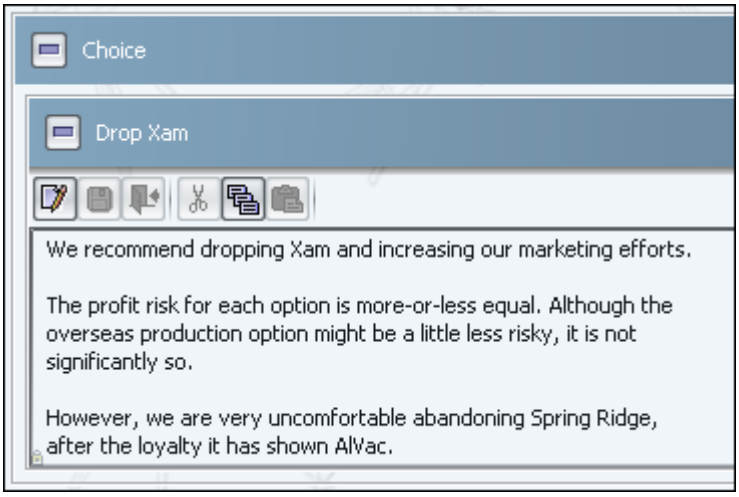

Figure 3. Recommendation