

## Business On My Mind: Good People Making Tough Choices

By Jeri Mae Rowley

Rushworth Kidder would say ethical fitness is like physical fitness. “You have to work on it all the time so that it becomes a way of life—it is reflected in your integrity and your leadership. A mature sense of ethics is one of the most dominant of all leadership characteristics.”

Kidder is the author of *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living* (Fireside, 1996). His book explores ethical dilemmas in the home, school, and workplace.

In an age of high-speed change and voluminous (yet incomplete) information, Kidder says the toughest decisions always have ethical components. “The difference between talking about ethics and acting ethically is summed up in two words: moral courage.”



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Moral courage is needed to make tough choices that aren't about right vs. wrong. The toughest ethical dilemmas revolve around questions of **right vs. right**. In these situations, two deeply held values, “rights,” are pitted against each other and apparently cannot both be satisfied.

Based on study of thousands of real ethical dilemmas, Kidder presents four ethical dilemma paradigm pairs:

- Truth vs. loyalty
- Individual vs. community
- Short-term vs. long-term
- Justice vs. mercy

Consistently, in every walk of life--corporate, professional, personal, civic, international, educational, religious—the toughest decisions are those that pit one “right” value against another “right.” Consider this brief list of “right and right” dilemmas offered by Kidder:

- **It is right to provide our children with the finest public schools available--and right to prevent the constant upward ratcheting of state and local taxes.**
- **It is right to extend equal social services to everyone regardless of race or ethnic origin--and right to pay special attention to those whose cultural backgrounds may have deprived them of past opportunities.**
- **It is right to bench the star college quarterback caught drinking the night before the championship game--and right to field the best possible team for tomorrow's game.**
- **It is right to resist the importation of products made in developing nations to the detriment of the environment--and right to provide jobs, even at low wages, for citizens of those nations.**

- **It is right to find out all you can about your competitor's costs and price structures--and right to obtain information only through proper channels.**
- **It is right to protect the endangered spotted owl in the old-growth forests of the American Northwest--and right to provide jobs for loggers.**

Frequently, more than one pair of rights must be considered. But as Kidder points out, "merely to analyze a dilemma - even to fit it into the above paradigms - is not to resolve it. Resolution requires us to choose which side is the nearest right for the circumstances, and that requires some principles for decision-making." The decision-making principles do not give the solution. They merely provide three frameworks to approach the particular ethical dilemma being addressed. He outlines three such principles:

- **Ends-based** - Do whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number.
- **Rule-based** - Follow only the principle that you want everyone else to follow.
- **Care-based** - Do unto others what you would like them to do to you.

The need for moral courage in ethical decision making is important in all aspects of our personal and business lives. Rushworth Kidder concluded a keynote address to a council of nonprofit organizations with this statement:

**“It may not surprise you to learn that there really is no such thing as ‘nonprofit ethics.’ Neither is there any such thing as ‘medical ethics,’ or ‘business ethics,’ or ‘legal ethics,’ or ‘journalism ethics.’ There is only ethics...Don't be under any illusion that somehow one can be unethical in personal financial matters but ethical as the manager of a nonprofit. Don't be under any illusion that a corporate executive can be a cad in family matters but a paragon of virtue at work...There is no dividing up ethics into compartments: There's only ethics.”**

And, the toughest ethical choices good people make involve ethical dilemmas of right vs. right.

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