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ARTICLE ETHICS

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Sometimes you sense that something isn't right at work. You suspect that your finance colleague might be fudging numbers, your boss isn't telling his manager the truth about an important project, or your co-worker is skipping out of the office early but leaving her computer on so it looks like she's just down the hall. How do you know when it's worth speaking up or not? Can you protect yourself from potential consequences of calling out bad behavior? And when you do decide to say something, what do you say and to whom?

What the Experts Say

"Most of us don't face a billion-dollar fraud or an issue where someone's going to die tomorrow,"

says James Detert, a management professor at Cornell University's Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management and author of "[Why Employees Are Afraid to Speak](#)." But even minor issues can have serious consequences. "Ethical situations at work can be cause for alarm, *and* are also a normal part of doing business," says Detert. The key is to not let either of those realities prevent you from making a rational decision. "When it comes to ethics, we think it's a test of our moral identity, which makes us more emotional, less effective, and vulnerable to self-deluding," says Mary Gentile, author of [Giving Voice to Values](#) and director of [a program by the same name at Babson College](#). That's why it's important to not only know [how to recognize an ethical issue](#) but how to raise it — especially one that may be more of a gray area, she says. "There is no one strategy or answer for all situations," she says. "The key is to practice ahead of time, before a situation arrives so you're ready when it does." Here are some tips on what to do if you find yourself in a sticky situation.

Watch for rationalizations

"If something happens and you get that feeling in your gut that something's dodgy, a lot of preemptive rationalizations come in," says Gentile. That's because fear takes over. "Studies show that people are likely to overestimate how awful the confrontation will be, how terrible the retaliation will be, and how long the retaliation will last. You build up all the personal horrible consequences and find ways to avoid the harm or loss," says Detert. The most common rationalizations include: *It's not a big deal. I don't have all the information. This is someone else's responsibility. This must be the way these things are done (at our company, in this region, in our industry, etc).* "Statements like these allow us to recognize the problem and still feel not feel bad about not doing anything about it," says Detert. "It's not that these statements are false," says Gentile, "they're just not the whole truth." If you find yourself rationalizing in this way, question your underlying assumption. For example, "think about how many times someone says 'no big deal' when it's actually a big deal," says Detert.

Consider what's really at risk

You also want to be clear with yourself about what's happening. If your coworker is leaving early every day, is it worth doing something about? One could make the argument that she's stealing time from the company and therefore taking money that's not hers. But if she gets her work done, does it really matter? Gentile suggests asking yourself: *What is the value that's being violated here? Why is this troubling me?* Detert says to consider whether it's important to just you personally or to the larger group, either your team or the organization. Being clear about the issue will help you accurately weigh the pros and cons of addressing it.

Understand why people are acting the way they are

A useful skill when it comes to ethical situations is [perspective-taking](#). Rather than casting your colleague as bad, seek to understand the reasons behind her actions. Typically, people have an understandable (if not defensible) motivation. Your finance colleague may be fudging the numbers because he wants to make his boss look good or he's afraid of losing his job. Put yourself in your colleague's shoes and try to understand what she's trying to achieve. Gentile gives the example of someone she knows who was asked by her boss to hide the firm's underperformance over the

previous year. “Her boss wanted her to find a different benchmark that would make it look like the firm had done OK,” says Gentile. The woman thought about her boss’s goal in this scenario and “decided that he wasn’t invested in being unethical but he wanted to get through a tough conversation with a client that afternoon.” This information helped the woman decide how to respond to his request because she now understood “what was at risk for him” and instead of doing what he asked, she could provide him with information that would help him get through the conversation.

Weigh the pros and cons

“Only each of us individually can decide which issues we’re willing to lay it on the line for,” says Detert. So consider your situation carefully. What would be the benefit of speaking up? What would the consequences be if you didn’t? One of the biggest pros of saying something is that you might help the business, especially if the unethical behavior puts the company at risk of a lawsuit, damaging an important customer relationship, or losing money. You might also feel better about yourself if you don’t stay silent. Detert says that research has shown that [people regret inaction more than they do actions that didn’t go well](#). The cons will be very situational but might include the fact that the situation is unlikely to change or you are the sole earner in your household and can’t risk losing your job. “There may be consequences and there may be times that you don’t speak up because the positives don’t outweigh the negatives,” says Gentile. Detert adds: “We live in a society where most of us are dependent on employers for salary and benefits and we don’t have the power that allows us to be free moral agents. None of us will be able to speak up about every problematic ethical issue. We are all compromisers in that regard.”

Talk to the perpetrator first

Detert and Gentile agree that when you suspect someone is acting unethically, in most cases, you should talk to him first. You might be tempted to go to your boss or your colleague’s boss, but it’s often better to give the person the benefit of the doubt and assume that, when he sees how his behavior is perceived, he’ll change. Give him the opportunity to correct his ways or to at least explain himself before you escalate. That said, if the violation is a particularly serious one, with potentially grave consequences, you may need to go to your boss, speak to HR, or call your company’s ethics hotline immediately.

Rehearse

If you decide to say something to your colleague, don’t go in cold. “Spend some time with a trusted peer, your spouse, or a good friend — someone you can talk the situation through with in a non-defensive, open way – to test your reasoning and develop an action plan,” advises Gentile. If you build confidence by rehearsing, then you’ll have more energy to engage in the conversation. And “you won’t have to rehearse as much in the future, when the same type of issues come up over and over,” adds Gentile.

Ask questions, don’t accuse

Broaching the subject by saying, “I think what you’re doing is wrong,” or giving a lecture on morality

is likely to backfire. “That leads the other person to shut down and get defensive — not because they’re unethical but because they’re human,” says Gentile. “A better place to start would be to ask questions instead of making assertions,” Detert explains. Use phrases like: “Can you help me understand...” or “Can you help me see why you’re not worried...” Detert points to two reasons why this approach works. First, he says, “there’s a possibility that the person isn’t aware they’re doing something wrong and your questioning might allow them to see the problem.” Second, asking questions is “a reasonably safe way to determine if the target is going to be open to discussing this issue or whether you need to pursue another avenue.”

In the best-case scenario, your colleague may respond by saying, “Wow, I haven’t thought about it that way,” and change his behavior. Problem solved. Or he may start to rationalize his actions: “This is always how we’ve done it.” “You’re not seeing the big picture.” In this case, you want to align yourself so he doesn’t feel accused. Detert suggests saying something like “I just asked because I’m concerned about you and I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble” Or “I know we share the same overall goals, I just wanted to help make sure we were on track” or “I wanted to be sure we protect the organization’s reputation.” If your colleague believes you’re on his side, he’s more likely to be open to changing his mind about his behavior.

Escalate when necessary

It’s also possible that your colleague will react negatively to your questioning and say something like “Let’s not talk about it anymore” or “Mind your own business.” If that happens, the next step is to ask yourself: *Do I want to talk to someone else about this? Or do I let it lie?* “Only you can decide,” says Detert. If you want to pursue it, you might schedule a meeting with your boss and again treat it as information gathering. You can say, “I want to share what I’m seeing. I’m uncomfortable with it and I wanted to get your perspective.” If your boss doesn’t care, you’ll need to decide if it’s worth escalating further. At each step of the way, be open to what you’re hearing. “You may see that you weren’t aware of what was going on and once you have further information, your own perspective might change,” says Detert.

Protect yourself

“We know enough about whistleblowers to know that retaliation is real,” says Detert. You’ll probably never be in a situation where it’s 100% safe to speak up so “think about how you might protect yourself,” says Gentile. She suggests keeping a record of relevant conversations and enlisting allies to support you if things go sideways.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Seek to understand your colleague’s perspective — why is she acting the way she is?
- Consider the benefits of speaking up against the potential consequences
- Rehearse what you’re going to say before calling out unethical behavior

Don't:

- Rationalize the behavior just because you're afraid of having a tough conversation
- Go straight to your boss or HR unless the situation is severe — try talking directly to your colleague first
- Make moral accusations — ask questions and treat the initial conversation as information-gathering

Case Study #1: Test the waters before speaking up

Sharon Fritz* had been in her role as legal counsel at a software company for two months when she suspected a vice president was trying to deceive a new customer. Sharon and the vice president, Kim*, had had a conference call with the customer's lawyer about the terms of a contract. "Because I was new, I didn't follow everything that was said," Sharon recalls. As a result, she followed Kim's suggestions on how to draft the language. But when they were finalizing it, Sharon realized that one of the clauses was vague and open to interpretation, in a way favorable to their company. She decided to email Kim about the issue, then ask her about it at their next meeting. "Is this what you meant to do?" she asked. Kim told her yes; she had wanted the language to be vague. "She said it in a way that made me think she wasn't open to hearing anything more about it," Sharon explains. Afraid that an unpleasant confrontation would harm her new working relationship with Kim, she didn't go any further. "It was clear what she wanted to do, and I didn't think I was going to change her mind."

But Sharon was worried that when the customer got the first invoice, things would blow up, and she was right. A month after the contract was signed, the CEO called her into his office and explained that the customer was upset about the invoice and felt deceived. Sharon explained what had happened. The CEO told her that wasn't how their organization did business and asked her to push back in the future. "He knew that [Kim] was tough and understood why I hadn't stood up to her," Sharon says. But she still felt as if her reputation had been damaged and regretted not saying anything. "It was valuable lesson for me. If the same thing happened now, I would just tell her, 'We can't do that' and give her alternatives," she says.

Case Study #2: Stand your ground when necessary

As an HR director at a large global company, Carla Santos* was often privy to sensitive information about employees. So, when one of the company's executives became severely ill, she wasn't completely surprised when a relative reached out to explain the situation. Unfortunately, however, this put her in a tough position. "I possessed medical information which typically an employer doesn't have access to," she explains. "The executive team realized that the family had confided in me and they were very interested in finding out the extent and gravity of the illness," she says. But she didn't feel comfortable violating the family's trust by sharing the information. She knew that keeping quiet might negatively affect how her bosses perceived her, but that was a risk she felt was worth taking.

“I put my foot down and simply said that I would only share my own observations as a bystander,” she says. The decision was driven not only by her personal values but also her concern that the organization could be sued should the private information have any impact on the employee’s salary, benefits, promotion potential, or future employment.

As she suspected, her stance did have consequences. Her boss and one member of the executive team “became much more guarded” with her. But she still has no regrets: “I knew I was doing the ethical and legally correct thing.”

**Names and details have been changed.*

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the [HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work](#). She [writes and speaks](#) about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).
