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**If you can answer question 6 comfortably, you've made your decision. If you are not comfortable, you need to go through the thought process again to find a solution you can live with.**

While your inclination may be to “tip off” Anna so she doesn’t close on the house immediately until after the RIF notifications have occurred, know that in doing so you are breaching your duty as an agent of the company. Could you live with that? Or, is it better to step through the process and realize that the best solution IN THE MOMENT is to keep silent about the reorganization and wish Anna well.

Finally, if your organization has a code of conduct, be sure that your actions are in line with it.



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# On The Call...

**A Newsletter Dedicated to Supervisors and Their Challenges**

**Volume 18 • Issue 2**

## Six-Question Guidelines for Ethical Decision Making



As managers, you are called upon, at times, to make ethical decisions. These decisions often require a quick response to a complex issue. The Six-Question Guidelines found below are designed to be a practical tool to help you remember, and think through, the key ethical considerations in order to develop a solution.

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Taking the time now to work through an issue will help build your awareness of the process and help you develop skills for applying the six questions to future dilemmas more effectively and with greater confidence.

Let's look at a scenario that requires a decision on your part, as a manager, on how you will handle the issue. We will then step through the Six Question Guidelines to help you arrive at a solution.

*You have just come from a senior staff meeting, where plans for a reorganization have been discussed. It's likely that some positions in your department will be eliminated as a result. You were told not to disclose this information. You are having breakfast with Anna, one of your Project Managers. You meet with Anna and she informs you that she just received a call from her attorney and that she and her husband are closing on their first house next week. She indicates that they have been waiting on all the paperwork and the approvals for a couple of weeks now, but everything is finally all set. She states that it is going to be a bit tight financially for a while. The mortgage is a lot more than their rent. But Anna indicates that, with both of their salaries, they will probably just make it. She exclaims how excited she is, and she tells you that she wanted you to be one of the first to know.*

What will you say to Anna?

## Your first step is to define the problem carefully.

### 1. Why is this bothering me?

- Briefly describe the issue.
- Is it really an issue?
- Am I genuinely perplexed or am I afraid to do what is right?

In this scenario, the definition of the problem is that one of your employees has just informed you that she is closing on a house in the next week and that her salary is necessary in order to meet the mortgage. You have just been informed that a reorganization is imminent and positions in your department are

likely to be eliminated. You have been told not to disclose the information to anyone.

In asking, "Why is this bothering me?" you clearly have a dilemma in that, when face-to-face with Anna, you initially don't know what to say to her. Your first instinct is that you likely want to forewarn her not to go through with the closing on the house or to at least delay the closing. You want to save her from making a big mistake. But your management has told you to remain quiet about the reorganization. You are caught between doing what is right for the organization – saying nothing about the reorganization – and doing what seems to be right for the employee – forewarning Anna to delay the closing until we know for sure if she is likely to be affected by the reorganization.

## Next, do a stakeholder analysis to further define the problem.

### 2. Who else matters?

- What are the stakeholders who may be affected by my decisions?
- For each stakeholder: What is their "stake"?
- What are their legitimate interests?
- Is there common ground among the stakeholder interests?
- Are there conflicts?
- Which stakeholder takes highest priority? Why?

*What constraints do the other stakeholder interests place on your ability to serve the priority stakeholder?*

While, at face value, the stakeholder appears to only be Anna, all the employees in your department are stakeholders. At this time, you don't know who will be affected by the reorganization, but whether an employee is laid off or remains with the organization, every single person in your department will be affected in some way. And taking it a step further, if you say something to Anna about the reorganization, the information would likely spread like wildfire throughout the organization, thus jeopardizing the entire reorganization.

## Now, determine your level of ethical obligation.

### 3. Is it my problem?

- What are my obligations?
- Am I responsible or is someone else?
- How far should I go in resolving the issue?

This issue certainly is your problem. As a manager and an agent of the company, you have an obligation to remain silent about the reorganization. You will likely have a say in who stays and who remains in your organization. Will your decisions be colored by the fact that you know your employee, Anna, just closed on a new house? Impartiality, and taking an objective view on the reorganization is your responsibility. Is there something you could say to Anna, without divulging the reorganization, that would have her rethink the situation or, at the very least, delay the closing?

## Next, define the ethical concern and develop a tentative solution.

### 4. What is the ethical concern?

- Legal obligation
- Fairness
- Promise keeping
- Honesty
- Doing good
- Avoiding harm
- Policies and values

As stated above with the third question, there are numerous ethical concerns here. As a manager, you must uphold the policies and values of the organization and keep the reorganization confidential. You have an obligation to review your employees to determine who is best eligible for elimination. You don't want Anna harmed if she should close on the house and then have her position be eliminated. But at this time, you don't know how many positions in your department will be affected, who will be affected, or what other personal issues other employees may have. For now, your likely best solution would be to

congratulate her and wish her well, since she is right in front of you.

## Now, "test" your ideas with those of other people.

### 5. What do others think?

- Who can I talk to for advice?
- What can I learn from disagreements with others?
- Are we disagreeing about information or different ways of thinking?
- Are roles and worldviews affecting how we see the issue?

You may want to consider speaking to HR or senior management about Anna's situation immediately. You may already have an idea where Anna stands in your department and whether she is or isn't eligible for elimination. Express your concern. If she is a potential target for elimination, discuss with HR how best to handle her situation to ensure there is no harm in her closing on the house. If she isn't a target for elimination, then no harm has been done to Anna. At least notifying HR and senior management after your discussion with her will help you work through the issue and solve the problem.

## Finally, "test" your solution with your own conscience.

### 6. Am I being true to myself?

- Does my decision "fit" my sense of values and personal identity?
- Does my decision "fit" the values of my organization?
- Ask questions that challenge your own rationalization
- Could I share with my family?
- Would I feel comfortable reading about my decision in the paper?

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