

How Do I Voice Our Ethical Values?

Once we have decided to act on our values, it can be difficult to determine what our next steps should be. We may feel strong emotions like betrayal, anger, or fear that can lead us to act impulsively or to choose not to act at all. Thinking ahead about how we will handle an ethically challenging situation prepares us to offer our best response.

Here are five effective techniques for voicing ethical values:

1. Ask Questions

- Make inquiries, not accusations
- Don't assume you know others' motivations
- Try to obtain a clear picture

Asking questions can help you understand the situation. Maybe you misunderstood something, and there is not actually a problem. Or perhaps the other person's motive is not what you imagined it to be. Asking questions can help clarify the situation and help the other person rethink their choices.

You might say, "Could you walk me through the steps that led to this decision?" or "I'm wondering how this situation came about. Could you give me some background?"

2. Gather Information

- Look for relevant data
- Document events
- Find examples

Gather all the information you can. Take notes to document conversations, phone calls, etc. Objective data can assist you and others in making ethical decisions and can be used to support your position.

You could share information by saying, "We can learn from XYZ University's handling of a similar issues" or "I've done some research. It looks like the last time we faced this issue, we went in another direction and had a good outcome."

3. Seek Input

- Identify reliable coworkers whose judgment you trust
- Do they agree with your assessment of the situation?
- Ask how they might proceed in your shoes

Talk through the situation with trusted coworkers. They may have useful insights and ideas that can provide moral support as you step outside of your comfort zone. Often simply voicing your concerns out loud can help determine your next step. You can also visit the [EthicsPoint](#) resource webpage for assistance. Remember, you are not in this alone.

You might say, "Could I run something by you? I'm looking for an outside perspective on a situation" or "Could I get your thoughts on a hypothetical?"

4. Reframe the Situation

- Present a different perspective
- Be objective and neutral
- Call attention to risks
- Propose an alternative

Reframing the situation can help to clarify what is at stake. Try presenting the situation in a way that highlights your concerns and any potential negative results. Show the other person that you are not challenging their integrity by using neutral, non-blaming language.

You could say, “I think some people might interpret this situation as problematic,” “Have you considered the risks this might create?” or “What if we tried it this way instead?”

5. “Buy Time”

- If it gets intense, press pause
- Bring the issue up again
- Don’t send the email until you’ve slept on it
- Practice in advance what you will say

There is no need to make a difficult choice under pressure; there is always more time available. If a discussion gets intense or you feel pressured to make a quick decision, press the “pause button.”

To do this, you can say something like, “I’d like to think on this a bit. Can we pick the conversation up tomorrow?” or “I’d like to run this by some people before I commit.” If you are unable to speak up in the moment, such as in a meeting or during a phone call, you can email later with “some follow-up thoughts.”

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With permission of the author, the techniques suggested for dealing with values conflicts identified herein are based on the book *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right*, by Mary C. Gentile, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010 and the Giving Voice To Values Pedagogy and Curriculum, <https://www.darden.virginia.edu/lbis/initiatives/giving-voice-to-values/>.