

TRUST, BUT CLARIFY LEARNING MODULE TRANSCRIPT

There will likely come a time in your career when you find yourself facing this dilemma: something doesn't seem quite right, and you are unsure about whether or not you should speak up. Perhaps it will be because you are asked to do something that feels wrong. Or, maybe it will be because you witness colleagues or superiors engaging in actions that appear to be unethical or illegal. What will you do? Will you go along? Will you ignore what you see and hope that the situation works itself out? Or will you say something? How will you decide? And if you decide to say something, what will you say and to whom will you say it?

If, right now, you are thinking, "That's a lot of questions," you are right. But it pales in comparison to the rush of questions that may overtake you when faced with such a dilemma. Knowing how to handle an ethically questionable situation properly is a matter of preparedness.

Like most people, Heather wasn't prepared when she found herself in the middle of a situation that didn't seem right to her. The request from her supervisor seemed normal at first. But as time progressed, it became clear that the request was anything but normal. Deciding how to handle the situation left Heather feeling confused and afraid, but eventually, with input from others, she settled on what to do.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this learning module, we will use Heather's story to illustrate when and how to speak up at work. We will examine the importance of asking questions, seeking guidance, and pre-planning how you will handle ethically questionable situations. We will also explore how an ethical framework such as the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles can serve as a guide to help you both evaluate a situation and determine the best course of action.

KNOWING WHEN TO SPEAK UP

In Heather's experience, lending one's credit card to one's team members to cover work-related expenses wasn't an unusual occurrence. Her staff borrowed her card on occasion, and *she* had borrowed her supervisor's card in the past. So when Heather's supervisor asked to borrow her credit card and provided a plausible reason for why she was unable to use her own, Heather reasonably assumed that the request was work related. Because there were no red flags at this point, Heather had no reason to inquire about the purpose behind the request.

That wasn't the case the second time her supervisor asked to borrow her credit card.

Video Clip — Heather

I was at one of my best friends' wedding shower and received another text message from my boss asking again, "I might need to use your credit card again, where are you, can I come get it?" And so I thought that was a little bit out of ordinary, but didn't really know how to say no. She ended up coming to meet me at where I was to borrow my card again. It definitely was weird. It definitely felt a little strange, but I just felt very

uncomfortable with asking why she was using my credit card. I felt uncomfortable because she was my boss; she was my mentor. She was someone I trusted. And I think I just wasn't sure how to question her.

The second request, coming so soon after the first, and the urgency with which her supervisor sought to gain access to the credit card, left Heather feeling that something was awry. But she didn't know what, if anything, to do about it. It was the realization that her supervisor's use of her company credit card had been personal, coupled with the request that she pay for those charges out of her paycheck, which convinced Heather that she needed to act. She was now seeing multiple red flags, and her gut reaction was telling her that what was happening was wrong. Even still, she was uncertain about what to do next.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Should Heather's first step have been to question her supervisor about the use of her company credit card? There isn't a single right answer to this. As noted earlier, there didn't appear to be anything to question the first time Heather received the request. The second time, the request seemed suspicious, but other than an uneasy feeling, Heather didn't have much else to go on.

Asking questions when the reason for a request is unclear, or when the request seems to go against ethical or legal norms, is a good idea. If a situation feels wrong, it probably is, and asking questions can help to clarify any misinterpretations you may have, or it may confirm that what you are feeling is valid.

Even so, asking questions can be difficult to do.

Video Clip — Heather

After I realized the severity of the situation, the amount of the charges, and that I was essentially involved, I think that's when I started getting scared. You know, feeling guilty. I felt a lot of guilt because I didn't ask enough questions like, "Why — why do you need my company card?" So many things were going through my head, but I just was almost too scared to ask for maybe — confrontation — or just questioning your boss in a light that, you know, you're kind of opening up their...flaws in a way or personal financial issues potentially. So, it was just kind of that feeling of, "Why did I give her my card again, did I put myself in this position?" Or...just a lot of doubt and confusion.

Fear of confrontation is not uncommon. And, because people often fear confrontation, they avoid asking questions in situations where exposing the wrongdoing of others can result in negative repercussions. This is especially true in the workplace. Sometimes the fear of confrontation and negative repercussions is overblown and sometimes it isn't. Our emotions can negatively impact our decision making and can lead us to decide to do the wrong thing or to do nothing at all. Seeking the perspective of others can help us to remain grounded in the reality of the situation while we determine the best course of action to take.

SEEKING FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

Heather's instincts led her to seek feedback from friends and former supervisors about the situation in which she found herself. People she spoke with, both outside of the company and within it, all told her the same thing: what your supervisor is doing is wrong. Those who worked at the company added another element: not only is it wrong, but also you are at risk because it looks like you are colluding with your supervisor to defraud the company.

Using trusted individuals as sounding boards can be invaluable when we are uncertain about whether we need to speak up or how to do it. Their feedback and guidance can be very beneficial to helping us sort out valid concerns from those that may be irrational, as well as to helping us to look at all aspects of the situation while putting together the best plan of action.

PRE-PLANNING YOUR RESPONSE TO ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE SITUATIONS

While it isn't possible to know in advance what ethical dilemmas you will face in your career, you can still develop a plan that can help you to successfully resolve those dilemmas when they appear. There are two key elements to such a plan. First, you need an ethical decision-making framework (or personal code of conduct) that can help you to determine when a situation may require you to speak up. And second, you need a list of trusted individuals who can serve as your sounding board to help keep you grounded in the reality of the situation and help you to determine the best plan of action.

An ethical decision-making framework provides a consistent standard against which you can measure your actions and the actions of others, to determine whether they are aligned with the ethical behavior to which you are committed. It's a good idea to anchor your decision-making framework to a set of core principles which will ensure that you are applying a standard that is constant across all situations and not one that shifts or is situation-specific. An example of an effective, ethical decision-making framework is the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles.

The Daniels Fund has outlined eight principles for ethical decision making. These principles are based upon the tenets which Bill Daniels, a successful businessman and pioneer of the cable television industry, lived his life. The Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative principles are:

- **Integrity** – Act with honesty in all situations
- **Trust** – Build trust in all stakeholder relationships
- **Accountability** – Accept responsibility for all decisions
- **Transparency** – Maintain open and truthful communications
- **Fairness** – Engage in fair competition and create equitable and just relationships
- **Respect** – Honor the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others
- **Rule of Law** – Comply with the spirit and intent of laws and regulations
- **Viability** – Create long-term value for all relevant stakeholders

Once you develop your ethical decision-making framework, you should share it with your trusted advisors. Doing so will strengthen their ability to best advise and guide you when you are confronted with an ethical challenge.

REFLECTION 1

Had Heather been aware of the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles, she may have been able to use them to help her navigate this difficult situation. Much of the stress and fear she experienced was the result of the uncertainty she felt about whether she was dealing with an ethical issue, as well as whether she needed to take action. Identify the ways in which the actions of her supervisor violated these principles and crossed the ethical line.

REFLECTION 2

Create a personal code of conduct — using the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles — that describes how you can apply them in your life. A personal code of conduct is a statement that embodies the ethical principles to which you are committed. An example of a personal code of conduct based on the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles could be something like:

*I believe that **Trust** is paramount in all relationships. I am committed to being worthy of the trust placed in me in each of the roles I hold in life. Being worthy of that trust (trustworthy) means that I will be **Accountable** in all of my decisions. I will be **Transparent**, never intentionally seeking to hide or obscure the truth. I will work to ensure that my actions promote and uphold **Fairness**. I will **Respect** the right of others with whom I share this world to build a healthy and peaceful life for themselves — free from unnecessary and unjust complications created by me. I will comply with the **Rule of Law**, not just the letter, but also the spirit, recognizing that abiding by the former and ignoring the latter is behavior that is unworthy of the trust that is placed in me. I will strive to imbue my actions and ideas with long-term **Viability** by ensuring that they create value for all who are impacted by them. I will choose to live my life in this manner because I believe that **Integrity** is one of the key ingredients in happiness — my own and that of everyone around me.*