

Ethics Tests



Character/Virtue

Does this action represent the kind of person I am or want to be?

Does this decision represent the kind of organization we want to be?

You may wish to begin with **Ethics and Virtue** (www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/ethics-and-virtue) from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Then return here to see how the test is operationalized and study the two examples linked at the bottom of the page.

How to use the Character/Virtue Test

To use this test, ask

- Does this action represent the kind of person I am or want to be?
- Does it represent my organization's reputation or vision of the kind of enterprise it wants to be?

Why is this a valid way to decide right and wrong?

The kind of person I am, or the kind of organization this is, are as important to living a good life as what specific actions we do. My character and the organization's culture are represented and influenced both by how we act and by what we aspire to be. To focus only, as the other ethics test do, on how to judge individual actions to be right or wrong would be to miss an important aspect of ethics.

Part of our aspiration is to have virtues or habits of acting in certain ways that fit our character. If we know who we are and aspire to be, we can decide how to act by considering whether an action is something that would be done by the kind of person or organization we want to be.

Applying the test

STEP 1: Ask if the action will help to make you the kind of person you want to be.

- Consider whether the action fits your self-image or the story you would like to tell about your life. The most excellent or virtuous people are usually thought of as those who consistently act with honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, prudence and so on.
- One way to see if the action fits with who you would like to be, is to ask whether the action is something that the person you most respect in your company would do.
- Business people often call this question the Mirror Test, "If you do this action, will you be able to look at yourself in the mirror every morning?"

STEP 2: Ask whether the action will fit the company's reputation or vision of what it would like to be.

An individual's actions represent and affect not only him/her but also the firm or organization he/she works in. The image of what the company wants to be will be found in the mission and vision statements, the core values, and the ethics code, as well as in the stories that are told about the heroes and the villains in the firm's history.

STEP 3: Ask whether the action maintains the right balance between excellence and success for the firm?

- Excellence refers to how well the activities of the organization are being done. Each activity, such as producing a product or service, marketing it to customers, financing the organization, accounting and maintaining controls, and so on can be done in the best possible way. Striving for too much perfection in any one of these areas, however, can have an effect on the ability of the firm to do the other activities and generate profits necessary to keep it in operation over the long term. If the product or service is too perfect for the customer to afford it, then the firm will fail.
- Overemphasizing success, measured as profitability, can affect the excellence of the firm's activities, and thereby cause the firm to fail.
- Actions that maintain the right balance between excellence and success are therefore the right ones.

STEP 4: Draw a conclusion.

Actions that fit your idea of what kind of person you want to be, and with the firm's idea of what it wants to be are good actions.

Strengths

- Focuses us not just on individual actions but on the larger questions of what kind of individuals and companies it is good to be and on the role that the community we are part of plays in setting those ideals.
- Emphasizes that being an ethical person or an ethical company is not just a matter of following ethical rules but involves developing habits of acting in the way that we, our company, and the society think that good people and companies should act.

Weaknesses

Psychological research suggests that most of us do not act in a consistent way across different situations, motivated by our character traits such as honesty or generosity. We are motivated more by factors in the situation, even those with no ethical significance, as when we act generously because of the good smells of a bakery or less generously because of a higher ambient noise level.

Yet we continue to attribute our own and others' actions to good or bad character traits rather than to factors in the situation. This research doesn't indicate that we don't have dispositions to act a certain way but that steady virtue may be very hard to develop because situational factors do affect us so much. Having an ideal account of a particular virtue like courage, however, or a hero in our company to emulate might help us strive to develop the habit of acting in a virtuous way.

Case Examples

For case examples, see

- **“Less Sugar” Marketing** (<http://bit.ly/less-sugar-marketing-case>)
- **Phantom Expenses** (<http://bit.ly/phantom-expenses-case>)

For a page of quick links to move between ethical theories and steps to operationalize these theories, refer to the EthicsOps **Theory + Practice** page (bit.ly/theory-plus-practice).