

Ethics Tests



Everybody Test

What if everybody did that?

Are we cutting ourselves some extra slack?

Recognition of the respect owed to all persons gives a basis for three approaches to deciding right and wrong, the **Rights Test**, the **Everybody Test**, and the **Choices Test**.

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

How to use the Everybody Test

To use this test, ask

- What if everyone did that?
- If it is ethical for us to do that, then here comes everybody. What about that?
- Are we cutting ourselves some extra slack here?

An *exception* or cutting ourselves extra slack is claiming it is ethical for us to do an action but not ethical for others to do it in the same situation. This is not the same as claiming that it must be ethical for us because “everyone else is doing it.” It is asking what things would be like if everyone else really were doing the action in question.

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

We are all equal as ethical actors, so whatever is ethical for me must be ethical for others in the same circumstances. This is true for individuals and companies. So why should we be able to get away with something if others can't?

Applying the test

STEP 1: Specify what action we are considering.

Describe the action in a way that captures the ethically relevant features. Adjust the generality or specificity of the action to highlight what is questionable:

- Is the action part of a general category such as “not telling the truth” or “breaking a promise”?
- Does the action have specific characteristics that are relevant, such as “not telling the truth to save a life” or “breaking a promise because something more important is at risk” which are more specific descriptions.
- Avoid value-loaded descriptors that already contain the ethical judgment (“We are lying to the customer”) because this closes off further discussion.

STEP 2: Ask, “What if everyone did it?”

If the action were adopted by others in similar situations, would it:

- **Become impossible for anyone to do the action** because everyone tried to do it? If everyone lied, no one would believe anyone else, so it would be impossible for anyone to lie successfully (if lying is “deceiving others by not telling the truth”). If everyone broke promises then it would be impossible for anyone to do so because no promise would be accepted. If everyone filed false tax returns then the government would stop voluntary tax filings and collect taxes directly so it would be impossible for anyone to file a false return. Since everyone is equal, it is not ethical for us to do something that not everyone can do. We would be making an exception for ourselves.
- **Create a business climate unacceptable to us** because everyone was doing it? If I do not want to operate in a business climate in which I cannot trust people to tell truth or keep their promises, then I should tell the truth and keep my promises. Not to do so would be to make an exception for myself that I don’t deserve since everyone is equal.

How do we decide what is “unacceptable”? Consider what is important to me that would be sacrificed if we had to work in that kind of business climate. Is that the kind of world we want to live in? If we would not want to work in a world in which the action was common or if our firm and/or society would not want us to create a world in which the action were common, then it is not ethical for us to act in a way we find unacceptable for others to act.

STEP 3: Draw a conclusion for Step 2. What if everyone did it?

Either condition a. or b. would make the action unethical: “It is unethical to do this action since that would be claiming an exception for ourselves. It is (a.) impossible for us all do it, and/or (b.) the common adoption of the action would create a world we and our company would find unacceptable.

STEP 4: Ask, “What if they did it to us?”

If the action were directed at us, would we think it was ethical? We are not asking if we would like it but whether we would think it was ethical. This step of reversing the action is a way of applying the Golden Rule: “Do unto others.”

Strengths

- Reminds us not to give ourselves advantages in regard to what is ethical – that we are all equal in what is right or wrong.
- Addresses the free rider problem – we can’t justify being the only one allowed to market this way

Weaknesses

- Description of the action can miss the ethical issue.
- People who are vicious or fanatics may agree to a world that others would find unacceptable.

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).