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6 Steps for Making Ethical Decisions

5-6 minutes



Sometimes, as a coach you may feel that an action or behaviour is wrong. At other times, you may suspect or even know that a behaviour is illegal. In other instances, you may feel unsure about a situation and a decision, since there seem to be a number of acceptable alternatives. If you ask yourself these types of questions, the issue probably has ethical or moral implications.

This 6-step process you help you make a thoughtful and responsible decision.

- **1. Establish the facts in a situation**

Establish exactly what has happened (or is happening) and who is involved in the situation before trying to figure out what to do about it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What has happened or what is happening?
- When and where did certain events occur?
- Who is (or might be) involved in or concerned by the situation?

- What do the parties involved have to say about the situation?

- **2. Decide whether the situation involves legal or ethical issues**

The next step consists of determining whether the situation has legal implications. **The following questions can be useful in determining that:** Has anyone been harmed by the action or decision of another, and if so, in what way? Does the action or the situation contravene an existing law? Was there a breach of contract? Were the actions of the athlete discriminatory or constituted harassment?

- **3. Identify your options and possible consequences**

Ask yourself: **What could I do in this situation?** Think about a variety of options. The first one to consider should be not making any decision or taking no action. This would be the least demanding option, and it could be thought of as representing one end of a continuum of possibilities. As a second step, consider the other extreme of the continuum, and think of the most comprehensive or liberal action you might take in the situation. Then, identify several intermediate options. Do not rule out any option at this stage, even though at the outset it may appear an unlikely choice.

- **4. Evaluate your options**

Assess the pros and cons of each of your options outlined in step 3. This is critical in reaching a decision. The notions of outcome sought (i.e. striving to do what is good for individuals or the team) and means used (striving to do things right) are central to ethical thinking. A coach's decision should reflect a fair balance between

outcomes sought and the means used to achieve them.

The [National Coaching Certification Program's \(NCCP\) Code of Ethics](#) can be used as a reference point to evaluate your options.

- **5. Choose the best option**

Making an ethical decision requires a final reflection on what is the best decision under the circumstances, a just and reasonable decision that will apply where an ethical dilemma is involved. An ethical decision is “the right thing to do” with regard to the duties and responsibilities of the person making the decision, is made “the right way”, and is consistent with the values and behaviours outlined in the NCCP Code of Ethics.

Above all, a coach's duty is to ensure that the decisions he or she makes and the actions he or she takes do not result in harm, physical or other, to athletes. It therefore follows that in a moral dilemma, physical safety or the health of athletes is the overriding concern.

- **6. Implement your decision**

Putting your decision or plan of action into effect requires that you consider a number of things, particularly if it involves dealing with individuals or groups of people. Consider the following as you establish an action plan:

- **Choose your path.** Exactly what are you going to do? Plan carefully the steps you are going to take.
- **Think about what may happen.** Consider the likely outcomes of the decision and the how any consequences will be managed.

- **Identify who needs to know.** Consider who needs to be informed of or involved in implementing the action plan or decision.
- **Determine if you can deal on your own with the person(s) involved.** In issues not involving a contravention of the law, it is often best to try to deal with the issue informally and directly with the individual involved.
- **Warn, don't threaten.** This is an important concept when dealing with a situation at an informal level. It entails informing the individual of the logical consequences of what can happen if a situation is not resolved, rather than threatening the person with an end run.
- **Think about what you might do next if the chosen plan of action doesn't work.** If your original decision or plan of action is ineffective, think carefully about what to do next. Inform the individual that you now have to follow up with Plan B.

Want more information on how to make ethical decisions? The [Make Ethical Decisions \(MED\)](#) module, part of the [National Coaching Certification Program \(NCCP\) Multi-sport module series](#) for coaches, will provide you with additional knowledge! Contact your [Provincial or Territorial Coaching Representative](#) for more details!