

Ethikos Volume 35, Number 4. October 01, 2021

Checkmates and ethical dilemmas—both require skill and practice

By Aaron Miller, JD, MPA, and Brad Agle, PhD

Aaron Miller (aaronmiller@byu.edu) is an associate teaching professor in the Romney Institute of Public Service and Ethics at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, USA. **Brad Agle** (bradagle@byu.edu) also teaches at Brigham Young University as the George W. Romney endowed professor of ethics. They are both coauthors of *The Business Ethics Field Guide* and cofounders of Merit Leadership.

A former business student of ours—we'll call him Clyde—faced a small but important ethical dilemma early in his career. At the time, he was a purchasing agent for a major retailer. After a successful effort to rebuild a relationship with a large flatware manufacturer, this vendor sent him a set of colorful flatware for his newborn son. It was a thoughtful gift and worth just \$25, but accepting the gift violated his company policy. Clyde hesitated returning it for fear of damaging this renewed relationship. To make matters worse, Clyde's boss recently accepted a gift from the same vendor contrary to company policy. There was no easy way to return it without drawing attention to his boss's error.

What would you do in this situation? Clyde decided to keep the gift, and he never thanked the vendor or even told his boss about it. Instead, he put the unopened flatware set in a closet at home, where it sat for years. Eventually, Clyde gave it away to a thrift store charity.

According to Clyde, this decision still bothers him to this day. He was scared of offending the vendor and his boss, so he kept the gift, knowing it was the wrong thing to do.

Decisions like this should vex everyone who works in ethics and compliance. Clyde is not lacking in good character, by any reasonable measure—bad character is often how mistakes like this are explained—and we know he had all the knowledge and resources anyone might need to navigate this dilemma—he couldn't claim ignorance—so why did he make this decision?

Because Clyde was lacking *skills*.

This idea became apparent to us in our research for *The Business Ethics Field Guide*.^[1] Using a data set of hundreds of dilemmas that people faced at work, along with how they acted to resolve their dilemma, we identified the 13 most common dilemmas. These dilemma categories, like “Standing up to power” and “Showing mercy,” require skilled approaches for resolving them.

This document is only available to subscribers. Please log in or purchase access

[Purchase Login](#)