

## **Ethics**

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LIBS 674: Management and Leadership in Library and Information Studies

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October 2, 2022

What should I do? This is a question often asked when trying to decide the most ethical thing to do in an ethical dilemma. Moran and Morner (2017) state, “ethics is concerned with the principals and values that govern the behaviors of an individual or a group in terms of what is right and what is wrong” (p. 362). The Code of Ethics from the American Library Association states the committed values and the ethical responsibilities of the librarian profession (ALA, 2021). This Code of Ethics is a general code for libraries. However, there are many types of libraries and each one may have a slightly different professional code of ethics for their employees (Moran & Morner, 2017, p 374-375). For example, the medical Library Association will have a different Code of Ethics than the Special Libraries Association. Below I analyzed a few ethical dilemmas with a general library setting in mind.

### **Ethical Dilemma A:**

You are a reference librarian on duty at a large public library. Two teenagers come in and ask for instructions on how to build a car bomb. As a leader in this library, what would you do?

Weckert and Ferguson (1993) describe three main operations of a reference librarian: ascertaining the precise nature of the information required, determining the quantity and type of material needed to provide this information, and locating specific information in relevant sources (p. 173). To complete my job diligently, I would conduct a proper reference interview with the teens. While conducting the reference interview, my hope is to gather information, verbally and even nonverbally, to help me determine if the teens intend to use the ‘how to make a car bomb’ information maliciously or purely for research purposes.

After gaining more insight from the reference interview, I would then make a decision on how to proceed. If the teens are simply conducting a research project, then I would follow the

American Library Association's (ALA) Code of Conduct principle #1- to "provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests."

However, if the reference interview yields malicious intent, I would deny services to the teens. I know that the ALA states in their Code of Ethics that librarians should "distinguish between our personal convictions and our professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources," but I believe there are circumstances where that should not be upheld. Weckert and Ferguson (1993) state "moral obligations to one's fellow human beings override professional obligations," and I agree with that statement (p. 176). If the information requested is knowingly going to be used to harm another, then the information should not be given.

Moran and Morner (2017) mention a question-based framework to help with ethical decision making (p. 374). This framework allows an individual to refer to a list of questions to provide guidance when making an ethical decision. Two questions that really stuck out to me were:

Would you be proud to tell your parents about the decision you have made?

Are you able to sleep at night?

The conclusion you come to when making an ethical decision should have you answering 'yes' to those questions, regardless of the organizations Code of Ethics. If I felt these teens wanted these instructions to make a real car bomb, then I would have no qualms denying them my

services. In his article, *Leading with Heart*, Frierson (2011) states that authentic leaders need to understand their own values and “use those values to know the right thing to do in difficult situations.” Following an organizations Code of Ethics is not always the right thing to do.

I do not think I would call the police though. Some people think it would not matter if a librarian helps the patron find the information or not because the patron could simply find it elsewhere. But I think denying services to someone with ill intent is helpful in two ways. One, I would not feel morally responsible for their actions because I chose not to help them. Two, my refusal to help would “delay matters and may lead the person to rethink his or her intended actions” (Weckert & Furguson, 1993, p. 178). I would not call the police in hopes that the teens would rethink their intended actions. Calling the police to report the possibility of a car bomb would also go against another principle listed in The ALA’s Code of Ethics, it is a librarian’s duty to “protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought.”

Reaching out to the police could also set off a chain of events that could severely damage the lives of the teens. Think about a murder suspect that is cleared. People tend to judge others harshly even if they are cleared of any wrong doing. If the police question the teens about their intentions and it is found they have no malicious intent, their image could still be tarnished just because they were questioned by the police about such a serious topic, especially if this took place in a small town community and not in a large public library.

### **Ethical Dilemma B:**

You are the director of a small academic library. An automation vendor offers to take you out for dinner at a national meeting. As a leader in this library, what would you do?

I would decline the invitation to dinner. Principle #6 of the ALA Code of Ethics states librarians “do not advance private interest at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.” If my small academic library were in need of the automation vendor services, then I would prefer to meet them in a more professional setting to discuss any business dealings. Going out to dinner with the automation vendor at a national meeting may send the wrong impression, which would be they could ‘buy’ my interest with dinner. “To avoid a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest,...a library may prohibit its employees from accepting any gifts from vendors,...under any circumstances” (ALA, 2019). I think sticking with that principle would be my best option. It is better to avoid any chance of a conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Dilemma C:**

Patrons in your small inner-city public library have complained about homeless people taking baths in the library restroom and sleeping on the furniture. As a leader in this library, what would you do?

I would put up signs to discourage inappropriate usage of the bathrooms and the furniture. In his article, *Newport Beach libraries weigh rules against bathing in restrooms and leering*, Davis (2019) explains how the Newport Beach Public Library has a policy prohibiting “using restrooms [or furniture] for other than intended purposes.” One way the Newport Beach Public Library sought to combat the problem was to inform the homeless people using the bathrooms and furniture in inappropriate ways about resources available to people in need and the library also worked closely with the Newport Beach Police Department’s homeless liaison officer (Davis, 2019). A lot of times, calling the police is not a good solution. When advising a

woman on Ask a Manager, Green (2015), shared that calling the police would not really solve anything. Green (2015) wrote, it simply “pulls police officers and resources away from where they may be needed more.” The police officers, when called, usually only tell the homeless people to move along, which does not cease the problem (Green, 2015).

I think the best thing to do is start with a sign prohibiting inappropriate usage of the library’s bathroom and furniture. If homeless patrons do not abide by the rules set forth, then approach them with information about resources available for people in need of assistance. Hopefully, that will get them to a place that will meet their needs. Working with the city’s Police Department’s homeless liaison officer, which many cities probably have, could also help to resolve the problem.

“[Ethics] seek to establish how individuals should act in certain situations” (Moran & Morner, 2017). Not everyone looks at various ethical situations the same way. Using an organizations Code of Ethics can help a person decide what to do in an ethical dilemma. However, even a Code of Ethics cannot dictate conduct in all situations. I think it takes practice deciding what to do in different real life moral dilemmas and even then, it does not become an easy task.

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