

ETHICAL STRAIN AT WORK



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Translation: Semantix Oy

Printed by: Markprint Oy

1st edition 2021

ISBN 978-951-810-789-0 (bound)

ISBN 978-951-810-790-6 (pdf)

Product number 202131

ttk.fi

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Introduction

In any sector or profession, we may encounter situations in which we do not know what the right course of action would be. In addition, we may find ourselves in situations in which we know what the correct and best solution would be, but we are unable to act accordingly for one reason or another. Both of these are ethical challenges that can cause stress and strain. In order to prevent and reduce the ethical strain on workers, it is essential that the ethical dimensions of work and the structures predisposed to problems are known in the workplace. It is also important to support the onset of a more ethical work community.

The means of reducing the ethical strain are clarifying the current state, open and

confidential discussion within the work community, and practical action to support ethical behaviour. As with other types of work-related strain, all parties involved in occupational health and safety have their own roles and obligations for intervening in the event of ethical strain. It is also important to be aware that ethics – thinking about right and wrong – is a key aspect of professionalism.

The purpose of Ethical Strain at Work is to help workplaces in identifying and addressing work-related ethical strain. This publication is intended for managers, supervisors, occupational health and safety personnel and employees, as well as educational institutions.



What is ethical strain?

In any type of work, we may encounter situations that require us to assess what the best or right course of action would be. When we assess right and wrong with the intention and motivation to act in the way we consider best, it often leads to practical ethical action. We often want to act in accordance with our values. In other words, we aim for things and goals that are important and meaningful to us. For example, a person who values honesty will also endeavour to act and communicate openly at work and avoid distorting or obscuring information from others.

Ethical problems arise when several good things should happen at the same time but, for one reason or another, they cannot. In such cases, we are called upon to compare the importance of each goal with all the oth-

ers. It may be necessary to give up on one good to achieve another good thing. Another common scenario is a choice between options that only have bad consequences – for example, when it is necessary to choose an employee to dismiss. In such cases, we may consider which decision or choice would cause the least harm. Such situations may be burdens on us.

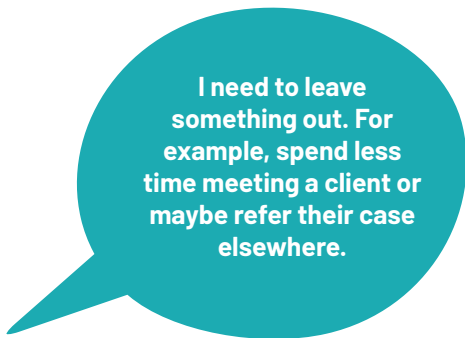
Ethical strain is the feeling of stress and strain caused by ethical challenges. These may be circumstances in which we do not know the right way to act. In such cases, the burden is due to uncertainty, the consideration of several alternatives and consequences, or a decision between several, possibly conflicting, requirements. An additional challenge occurs in situations such as resolving conflicts between members of



personnel: how can we decide on the fairest way to act while satisfying as many parties as possible and treating everyone equally?

Ethical challenges also arise in situations where an employee knows what the best and right course of action would be but is prevented from following such a course for some reason. Research has shown that “I cannot” situations are especially ethically burdensome compared with “I don’t know” situations. Being compelled to disregard our own values and act in a way that we feel is wrong can be intensely stressful. Such a situation may arise if the constraints or structures of the work do not enable ethical practices to be followed. This can occur if, for example, the resources do not enable work to be done to a high enough standard of quality.

The frequency of exposure to ethical challenges at work depends in some part on the sector. For example, in health care or social welfare work, meeting and helping patients and clients and making difficult decisions are among the core aspects of work in which ethical responsibility is built in. When we are involved in promoting people’s health and wellbeing, the work is already a form of ethical activity, as it is right to help the sick and care for others. On the other hand, workers often encounter conflicting expectations from different parties: the patient or client may expect immediate help for their problems while the work organisation exerts time and efficiency pressures, and the general perception of employees propagates an ideal of superhuman sacrifice and helping others. All of these factors may expose employees to ethical strain.



Ethical challenges can be encountered in many other types of work, and employees may experience ethical strain. Nursery school teachers may feel inadequate if it is not possible to work with children individually for reasons such as large group sizes or staff shortages. People on construction sites may experience a conflict between the principles of healthy, high-quality construction and tight contract schedules. Teachers might consider how to resolve a difference of opinion with a pupil’s parents concerning the pupil’s schooling. In any sector, employees may contemplate fairness and equality in matters such as remuneration, pay rises or promotions. It is important to note that experiences of ethical strain are not dependent on the person’s position within the organisation.

As such, workers may encounter ethical challenges specific to their sector, as well as general dilemmas of right and wrong that are not tied to a specific sector. Raising awareness of these issues among the personnel is an important step in supporting more ethical operations and reducing ethical strain.

Making ethical strain visible in the workplace

Talking openly about ethical challenges is a very important goal for work communities. It can increase transparency and promote the exchange of tacit knowledge and learning together. These factors reduce the experience of strain.

The first step in ethical decision-making is to be aware of the situation. This means that employees are capable of identifying various perspectives related to right and wrong in their work, as well as the consequences of their actions. Research has shown that people differ in terms of how easily they can perceive the ethical dimensions of their work. It is a good idea to shed light on different situations through discussion, foresight, joint handling, and evaluation. This increases employees' ability to identify the ethical aspects of their work.

When situations are discussed in teams or in the work community as a whole – taking into account the issues of confidentiality

It pains me to see unethical activity. It may be due to simple incompetence when a matter is not addressed in the workplace.

and privacy – more employees have the opportunity to share their experiences and views and learn together. This can alleviate some of the stress associated with a situation that has already occurred. At the same time, it can prevent strain by raising awareness and going through various operating models for resolving situations.

Workplaces should also have a channel for reporting unethical activity anonymously and securely.



Prevention and measures for reducing and eliminating harmful strain

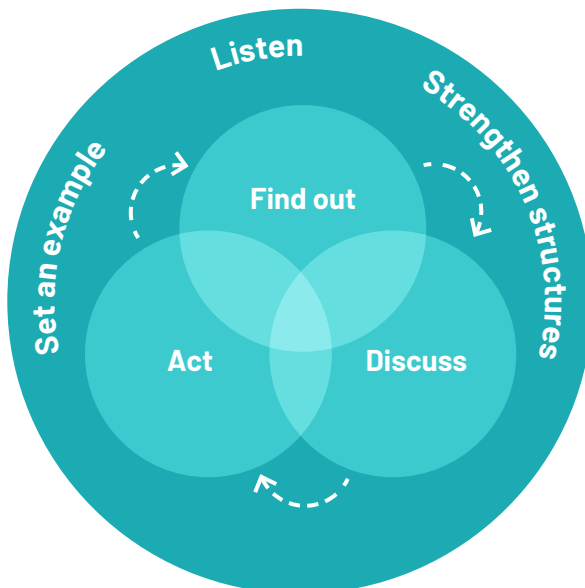
Transparency and discussion in the work community are the key means of preventing, mitigating and eliminating ethical strain. This can be described with the help of the three sub-areas summarised in the flow chart at the bottom of this page.

Find out

It is important for managers and supervisors, in particular, to be aware of the types of ethical challenges employees encounter in their work. In addition, when ethical challenges are shared between employees, it can help in appreciating how ethical dimensions may apply in a wide variety of roles and situations.

Surveys and discussions can be helpful. The very simplest survey may include the following questions addressed to every member of personnel in confidence:

- How often do you encounter situations at work in which you do not know what the right course of action would be? What are these situations like?
- How often do you encounter situations at work in which you know what the correct and best solution would be but are unable to act accordingly for any reason? What are these situations like?
- Do you feel that these situations cause you stress (for example, do you feel tense, restless, nervous or anxious or have trouble sleeping because things are constantly bothering you).



Discuss

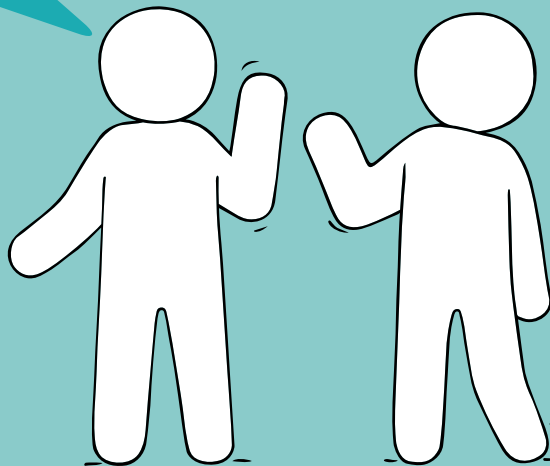
When the personnel are included in efforts to investigate ethical strain related to work, it is important to create an atmosphere of trust and spend enough time addressing concerns. It is especially important to be an open listener and treat employees in a genuine and respectful way, as challenges related to values and questions of right and wrong may be sensitive and personal. The following questions could be used to initiate discussion:

- What is an important goal for you in your work? Are you reaching this goal at the moment?
- What values are important to you in your work?
- What makes work meaningful for you?
- What kinds of ethical challenges do you encounter in your work?

- What type of support do you need to deal with ethically challenging situations?
- Do you have sufficient resources in your work to enable you to perform your duties in a responsible way in accordance with your values?
- If you are not currently able to work in a responsible way in accordance with your values, what changes would enable this?

Ethically charged situations may lead to strong emotional responses. However, there is no need to fear or avoid situations involving value conflicts. They can be approached like any other challenging situation: assess the underlying causes and consider the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and threats of various solutions.

What is important in your work?



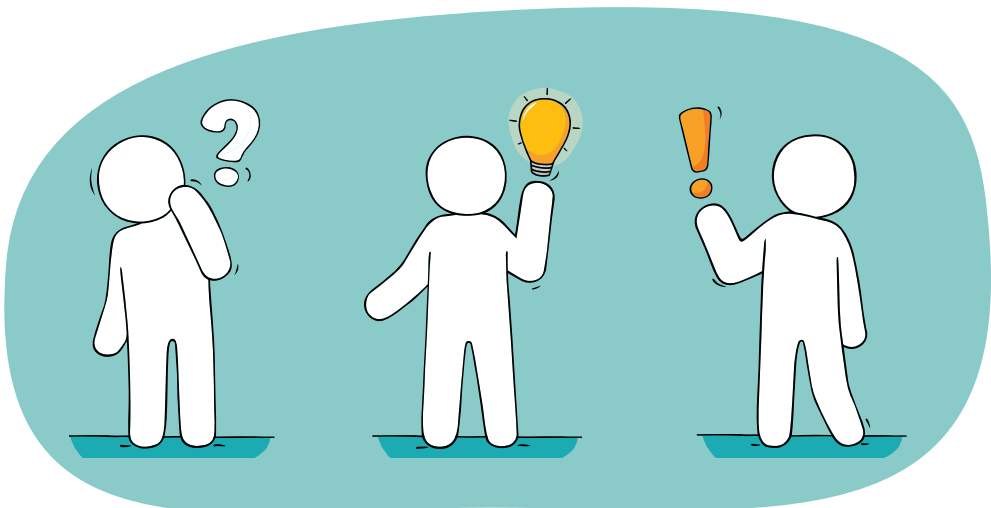
Act

Ethical strain is a component of the psychosocial work burden. The employer is responsible for identifying and evaluating the associated hazards. If it becomes apparent that there are clear shortcomings in the structures or resources in the workplace, the employer is obliged to investigate the underlying causes and intervene.

In particular, it is important for senior managers to intervene in the event of problems and ensure that structures are in place to support ethical activity. On the other hand, it is important to note that ethical strain may arise in many supervisory positions because it is necessary to consider many contradictory perspectives in practical work. Supervisors are often called upon to balance different issues and reach compromises between, for example, the policies and orders passed down by the senior management, customer expectations, and considerations of the needs of subordinates. In addition, supervisors do not always have a great deal of influence. This can make it more challenging to resolve situations, and there may be a risk of the supervisor feeling burdened by work.

As an employer, you have to say or order people: Just do this, that and the other.

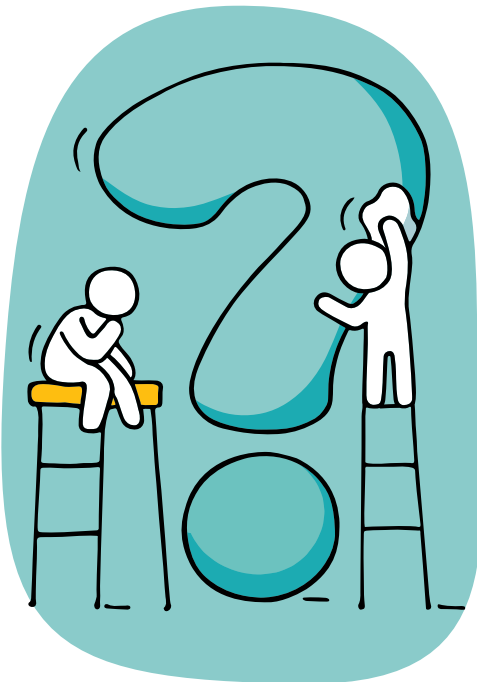
It is important for the work community to demonstrate the importance of ethical values through practical action. If ethical values, guidelines and recommendations are only visible on the organisation's website, in official documents or in keynote speeches, their guiding and supportive effect will feel far removed from everyday work. Forms of activity that support ethical behaviour should be consciously organised in the work community. These may include taking ethical perspectives into consideration during orientation. Work supervision is one example of practical action that can help in the management of ethical strain. It promotes learning, evaluation and development related to the employee's own work, and it can also enable the expansion of ethical viewpoints and the development of employees' values.



The harmfulness of stress and the health implications

Like other stress-inducing conflicts at work, uncertainty over the right course of action or an inability to act in the way the employee deems right are psychosocial stress factors. If an employee experiences an imbalance between the available resources and the demands of the job over a long period, it can expose them to many harmful consequences that can impair occupational wellbeing and health.

The magnitude of the strain imposed by ethical challenges varies from one individual to another. People have various means of handling the uncomfortable emotions that arise from these situations. Some may avoid making decisions and pass off the responsibility to others. Others may



My workplace has good values, but they are never put into practice. This is burdensome.

attempt to blot out the ethical dimension of the situation and seek a solution based on the facts. However, facts alone are rarely enough to identify solutions to ethical problems because the problems are always based on value conflicts. For this reason, ethical considerations can sometimes feel like questions of personal opinion in which any opinion is valid. However, choices and decisions should be made with consistency based on proper contemplation of the fundamental values to which the employee is personally committed. Decisions should also be aligned with the ethical rules in the workplace and professional ethical guidelines.

Conscientious employees who have spent time thinking about their values may find conflicts especially burdensome if external factors force them to act in contravention of their values. Severe stress can cause employees to dwell on individual issues, even outside of work. Ethical strain is a risk to occupational wellbeing and has been found to be linked to more intense burnout. Furthermore, a lack of the ability to detach and take the mind off work is associated with low wellbeing.

Addressing ethical strain in cooperation on occupational health and safety

Ethical strain is a type of psychosocial work burden, so the factors affecting it should be assessed as an aspect of occupational health and safety, and the planning, implementation and effectiveness of interventions should be monitored. Special sensitivity is required to address ethically challenging situations in cooperation on occupational health and safety, as questions related to personal values, right and wrong may be sensitive in many ways.

Employers are obliged to ensure that their occupational health and safety personnel have an adequate basis (such as training and time) for handling their duties. Where necessary, it could be wise to arrange additional training on identifying and

addressing ethical situations in the work community.

Employers should notify employees in good time of any matters that are related to the ethical dimensions of work and that affect working conditions. Employers should also ensure that assessments, surveys and plans relating to work ethics are communicated in a timely manner and discussed with employees or their representatives in an appropriate way.

The culture and atmosphere around ethics in the work community should be assessed and monitored. The objective should be to enhance operations and maintain ethical guidelines. It is important to note that



ethical practices in the work community are one aspect of the organisation's overall culture and the practices adopted therein. Therefore, ethics is ingrained in the structures of the work community, so the responsibility for reinforcing it cannot be on the shoulders of one individual. Any changes and actions should also apply to these structures. As such, it is important to ensure there are sufficient resources to work in an ethically sustainable way.

Employees have a responsibility to report any shortcomings (such as unethical activity or unclear or conflicting ethical guidelines) to their employers and participate in resolving situations that affect them in the workplace. In addition, everyone is responsible for complying with ethical guidelines and acting in an ethically responsible way in their work, including by treating others appropriately.

Occupational health and safety personnel, such as the occupational health and safety manager and representative, promote good working conditions and participate

The principles should be discussed more frequently and transparently – so they are reflected in everyday work.

in arranging activities designed to uphold the working capacity of employees. For example, they may analyse ethical challenges and the underlying causes, and they may intervene if they notice any problems. These may include insufficient ethical guidelines or a lack of knowledge about the ethical perspectives of the work. They may also arrange training for the personnel. Although employers are responsible for identifying and assessing the hazards related to work, the personnel engaged in cooperation on occupational health and safety should contribute to ensuring that work hazards are also assessed from the standpoint of ethical strain.



Considering ethics during recruitment and orientation and as a professional skill

Recruitment processes should include discussions on workplace values and ethical guidelines. One approach is to discuss the applicant's expectations and wishes regarding work and consider how they align with the requirements of the work. If an employee finds that their work is consistent with values and matters of importance to them, it can make the work feel more personally meaningful and enhance wellbeing at work and commitment to the organisation. In addition, if the applicant wishes to have some control over the planning and execution of their work, the arrangements should be discussed in more detail.

At the same time, the applicant should be informed whether the working duties make this possible.

Orientation should cover the expectations and wishes related to ethics from the perspectives of the employer and employee, as well as the working methods and norms of the work community. Such reciprocal transparency can reduce the risk of the employee encountering value conflicts between personal values and work further down the line, as such conflicts can lead to harmful stresses and even to exhaustion or a change of employer.

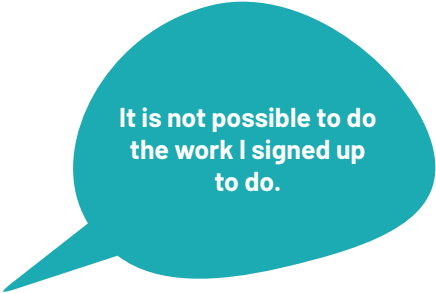
What do you want from your work?



One aspect of an ethical work community is a jointly agreed policy on which working methods are ethically acceptable. It is equally important to discuss the qualitative goals of the work, such as the expectations concerning the quality of work, learning new things at work, or independent work planning. The perceptions of members of the work community regarding these goals should also be discussed openly. Sometimes, it may be unclear or there may be differences of opinion over what is right and desirable at work. The work community should also permit different opinions about the methods and means of pursuing the goals. Open discussion is the only way to reach a shared understanding of common policies to guide the achievement of goals in an ethically sustainable manner. Failing to broach these issues may increase the risk of unethical activity.


It is important to note that being aware of ethical decision-making situations and taking responsibility in such situations is an aspect of professionalism and responsibility at work. This is particularly the case in sectors where respect for human dignity and the rights of others is essential. Another special group are managers at different levels who work with various stakeholders and encounter a lot of conflicts and choices between differing interests at work. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised in the context of different decisions and the consequences thereof, thinking about right and wrong is always an aspect of professionalism, irrespective of the sector.

The link between professionalism and ethical considerations can be seen as two-way. Similarly, ethical sensitivity at work – the ability to detect questions of right and wrong – is an aspect of professionalism. This can support the thorough consideration of circumstances and responsible



It is not possible to do the work I signed up to do.

decision-making. On the other hand, encountering ethical challenges at work can help employees to boost their professional skills. For example, employees at the start of their careers may only just be developing the ability to face and address various ethical challenges related to their jobs. If the workplace provides a safe atmosphere for employees to learn through discussion, feedback, examples set by others, and consideration and analysis of their own experiences, ethical decision-making situations are great opportunities for learning.



Every team should discuss ethics during team meetings.

Professional competence should be founded on tried and tested ethical principles that are a guiding light for practical action. At the same time, these constant, fundamental principles should be able to respond to changes with appropriate sensitivity. Everyone needs to identify the key values that they commit to in their work. At the same time, personnel should remain flexible and open to new perspectives and

the situational information that needs to be taken into consideration in various decision-making scenarios.

Many sectors already have ethical codes of conduct that emphasise the ethical responsibility of professionals. Even in the best cases, guidelines are only able to offer a general background on how to act. Putting them into practice always requires

individual, situation-specific judgment. This is how it should be, because it is not desirable – or even possible – to draw up professional codes of ethics that provide unambiguous and clearly defined procedural guidelines for every possible situation. For this reason, continuous development should strive towards the creation of an ethical mindset at a personal level and within the work community as a whole.

The importance of resources for ethical strain

A lack of resources may be a significant source of ethical strain, as this can prevent personnel from working in accordance with their values or in an ethically sustainable way. It is particularly important to consider the efficient use of resources in the workplace in order to enable ethically sustainable operations. The personnel should

not be exposed to harmful stress due to inadequate resources. Financial values cannot be the only values emphasised – it is also important to focus on the quality of operations. It is essential that the people who decide upon the allocation of scarce resources are able to act fairly and as openly as possible.

The importance of being able to influence work in the context of ethical strain

Modern working life emphasises the importance of self-direction and the possibility for employees to influence their work. These perspectives are also essential for preventing and reducing ethical strain. When employees have the possibility and power to influence how they plan and carry out their work, it leaves room for flexibility and, therefore, enables them to act ethically in accordance with their values in different situations. In practice, this can mean opportunities to influence

the structure of the working day and the order in which tasks are carried out. These possibilities can help engender a sense of personal empowerment at work. Empowerment means that the person has the ability and opportunity to make choices about their actions instead of being controlled by external structures. This can help employees to work according to their values and contribute to preventing the onset of ethical strain due to instructions and orders from above. Sometimes these require-

ments may guide employees to work in a way that is incompatible with their views of ethically responsible practice.

On the other hand, it is important to be aware that many jobs come with structures and constraints that limit the amount of influence an employee can have over their work. For example, it may be that an

employee would like to decide how many clients they serve in order to ensure that they can take their time with each client and focus on individual matters. However, this is not always possible. If the situation carries a harmful ethical strain, the employer should uncover the underlying causes and consider solutions for relieving the strain.

Concluding remarks

Ethically challenging situations arise in more sectors than one may first realise. Therefore, work communities must begin to discuss the topic.

Joint consideration of burdensome situations, alternative courses of action, and the consequences thereof may alleviate the ethical strain and promote the sharing of expertise within the work community. During the writing of this publication, we compiled some practical examples and descriptions of how ethical strain may appear in different operating environments. We have included these in speech bubbles throughout the text. We hope the examples will help work communities to identify ethical strain.

We also hope the publication helps work communities to create joint operating models for addressing ethically challenging situations. Our experiences and the discussions we have had in our networks make it clear that nobody should be left to handle difficult situations, make complex decisions, or resolve conflicting values in the workplace on their own. Working as a community to address these issues and reinforce mutual trust will benefit the work community as a whole, as well as employees and supervisors as individuals. This will strengthen the entire organisation. Handling ethical strain together is also an asset in terms of corporate image and recruitment.

On behalf of the working group
Seija Moilanen

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