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Moral minefields

Ethical landmines are everywhere - business, politics, the grocery store. Why is dodging them so tough these days?

**By Jeff Gammage
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Even before Mark Felt provoked a gale of accusation and retort by identifying himself as Watergate's secretive Deep Throat, the issue at the heart of his role had taken on a new and pressing prominence:

Ethics.

Today the question of ethics - who has them, who doesn't, and the ramifications for both - is generating news and disagreement from boardroom to bedroom to jury room.

"It's become like a national pastime, commenting on it, and talking about it," says Buie Seawell, former Senate chief of staff to Gary Hart, a man who knows something about ethical puzzles.

Thirty years ago, when Deep Throat was spilling secrets to Bob Woodward, not much was known or made of his motivations. But when Felt stepped forward last week - he'd been deputy director of the FBI during the scandal - everyone from casual Watergate followers to convicted Watergate felons had an opinion on whether he was a saint or a villain.

Today everybody's behavior - even that of the self-proclaimed hero of Watergate - is fair game.

What's changed? Everything.

Unprecedented amounts of information have moved as close as the computer keyboard, from there zapped across the country and around the world. The Web has given a platform to everyone from the bank president to the blogger. Round-the-clock news networks like CNN and Fox turn an unblinking eye on America's leaders and celebrities.

And when something goes wrong, people hear about it almost instantly - and continuously. Today the event that precipitated the Watergate scandal - a break-in at Democratic headquarters - would lead the headlines on CNN every 15 minutes.

"Dirty laundry is not as easy to hide," says David Steingard, assistant director of the Pedro Arrupe Center for Business Ethics at St. Joseph's University.

Something else is different too, one expert argues, and it's not good: Today, cheaters *do* prosper.

Kirk Hanson, a Santa Clara University ethicist, believes we've created a winner-take-all society, a place where infinitely greater reward flows from being just a little bit better than the rest. By, say, hitting a few more home runs, or being first with a scientific breakthrough.

Back in 1988, Hanson writes in the San Jose Mercury News, the best-paid baseball player earned \$2.3 million. Last year the top pay was \$20 million. In 1980, CEOs earned 40 times the salary of the average worker, but by 2000 they were earning 400 times more.

That's powerful incentive to get to the top, even if it means cutting corners.

Others - including the convicted - argue that media saturation has muddied the ethical terrain:

It's wrong to copy your term paper from the Internet, but no big deal to skip the book and read the Cliff Notes. Shoplifting is a crime, but nibbling from the bulk-food bin is just tasting. It's fine to take home a company pen in your pocket, but don't walk out with a ream of paper.

In an interview after his conviction in the pay-to-play investigation, former Philadelphia treasurer Corey Kemp said no one ever told him what gifts he could and couldn't accept. The jury found the evidence overwhelming, and today Kemp faces prison for trading access to his office for money and trips to the Super Bowl and NBA finals.

Kemp isn't the only one hurt by his malfeasance, ethicists say. Citizens paid - in failed government, in damaged reputation. Commerce Bank paid. The price of its stock immediately fell 6 percent when two of its executives were convicted in the same case. Investors paid, too: The drop in stock cost them \$276 million in share value. Since then the stock has largely recovered, although it hasn't regained the momentum that once made it a favorite of brokers and investors.

These days, experts say, it's clear that the stakes are enormous, that ethical breaches can generate cascades of repercussions, not just for corrupt public officials but for hard-working, everyday people who don't know they're going along for the ride.

Suppose you're rushing through the line at Wawa and the clerk mistakenly hands you an extra \$20 in change.

It might seem harmless to pocket the bill. But it's not, ethicists say. The first harm is to ourselves: You have to help create the society you want to live in.

"The daily things," Steingard says, "that's where you're made or broken."

That's not just a nice sentiment. Lagging ethics incur costs for society - for surveillance cameras, computer monitoring, drug tests, security guards. There's evidence that poor ethics weakens productivity, that output declines when workers don't trust one another.

Such real-world expense helps explain why many agencies, organizations and companies are stepping up efforts to enforce ethical standards. In government, scores of codes have been enacted since the Watergate crimes of the 1970s, and more are being written today. In Philadelphia, City Council has passed a package of bills that, if approved by voters this fall, would impose more stringent ethical standards on local government.

Does that proliferation mean we've become a less ethical society? It's hard to know. One man's blatant violation can be another's technicality.

To Democrats, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay is the embodiment of seamy behavior, wrongly accepting overseas trips from lobbyists. To Republicans, he's the victim of a partisan witch hunt.

Ethical questions that seem clear-cut in theory - *I would never lie* - can become complicated in reality. Sometimes the ethical thing *is* to lie.

"There are certain situations," says Filipino activist Baltazar Pinguel, of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia, "where you decide in favor of life."

As a political prisoner of the Marcos regime, Pinguel was presented with a false confession and a choice: Sign it or die. He signed.

Most of us never face such stark alternatives. But we do face dozens of small ethical questions every day, and we answer most without even knowing we've been asked.

The next time you belly up to the counter, deciding between a Big Mac and a Quarter Pounder, consider this: Is it ethical to eat a cow? Hindus believe it a holy violation. And groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals insist animals are not ours to use, even for food.

If you can't swallow that argument, think about the bun on your burger, and the buns at McDonald's everywhere: All that grain. All those needy relief agencies. In a world of finite resources, which is the greater good, their supplies or your lunch?

It doesn't stop there. How does the company treat the counter clerk? Does she get fair pay, medical coverage, sick time?

It's a lot to consider when all you want is a Number Four Value Meal. "I had a steak the other night at TGI Friday's, and I didn't think a whirl about it," says Jack Hill.

And he's an ethicist.

But seriously, says Hill, who teaches at Texas Christian University, living an ethical life is becoming increasingly complex. New sciences such as cloning challenge the very nature of what it means to be human. We maintain strong ethical traditions - *stealing is wrong* - but ideals, like "truth," have come to mean different things to different people.

"The boundaries," Hill says, "are up for grabs."

When you heard that *American Idol* judge Paula Abdul had been accused of sleeping with a contestant, you probably had the same reaction as other fans:

Who cares whom she dates? It's just a dopey TV show.

But here's the problem, experts say: Ethics is ethics. And a judge - even one on TV - is presumed to be impartial. Theoretically, if the better talent was axed by tainted judging, that singer lost an entire career - record contract, riches, fame. He might even sue the network.

"If you can't reason your way out of the Paula Abdul thing," says Steingard, the St. Joseph's professor, "how are you going to deal with it when the guy hands you back too much change at the store?"

TEST YOUR ETHICS

A variety of quizzes are online at <http://go.philly.com/>

ethicsquiz

Quiz answers

Question 1: *If you answered no, you are correct.*

N.J.S.A. 52:13D-24.1 now prohibits legislators and members of their immediate family from accepting anything of value from a governmental affairs agent totaling more than \$250 in a calendar year. The value of a week at the Shore house would exceed this amount for the assemblywoman and her husband. A pre-existing friendship between a legislator and a governmental affairs agent is not an exception to the ethics prohibition. Note: Such relationships are relevant in a criminal prosecution.

Question 2: *The answer is B.*

Sure, it might not solve the problem immediately, but then again, no one knows for certain if there even is a problem. Developing a policy with input from all will raise everyone's awareness of the issue and serve as an implicit warning to some to change their Internet-related behavior.

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