A Seven Step Guide to Ethical Decision Making

From Michael Davis, “Ethics and the University” (Routledge, London, 1999), pp. 166-167

1. **State problem.** For example, “there’s something about this decision that makes me uncomfortable” or “do I have a conflict of interest?”

2. **Check facts.** Many problems disappear upon closer examination of situation, while others change radically.

3. **Identify relevant factors.** For example, persons involved, laws, professional code, other practical constraints (e.g., under $200).

4. **Develop list of options.** Be imaginative, try to avoid “dilemmas”; not “yes” or “no” but whom to go to, what to say.

5. **Test options.** Use such tests as the following:
   - **Harm test:** Does this option do less harm than alternatives?
   - **Publicity test:** Would I want my choice of this option published in the newspaper?
   - **Defensibility test:** Could I defend this choice of option before a Congressional committee or committee of peers?
   - **Reversibility test:** Would I still think choice of this option good if I were adversely affected by it?
   - **Colleague test:** What might my profession’s governing board or ethics committee say about this option?
   - **Organization test:** What does the organization’s ethics officer or legal counsel say about this?

6. **Make a choice based on steps 1 – 5.**

7. **Review steps 1 – 6.** What could you do to make it less likely that you would have to make such a decision again?
   - Are there any precautions you can take as an individual (e.g., announce your policy on the question, change jobs, etc.)?
   - Is there any way to have more support next time?
   - Is there any way to change the organization (e.g., suggest policy changes at the next department meeting)?