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A Thanksgiving without Family: A Covid-19 Employer Dilemma Case

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A Thanksgiving without Family: A Covid-19 Employer Dilemma Case

As Covid-19 ravaged the peoples of the world in 2020, employers were presented with extremely difficult choices regarding the safety of their employees, customers, and communities. The case presented here is based on an actual organization in the Midwest as it navigated these new and difficult waters. Names have been changed, but the facts of the case are based on employee descriptions of the organization, its director, and its new policies. The case presents students with an opportunity to wrestle with real-world situations that they themselves have faced and with which they are familiar. In this paper, I present the case itself, the worksheet assignment for students, the grading rubric used, and describe how it is used in the course.

The case itself describes the Director of an alcohol and drug rehabilitation center located in the Midwest and her adoption of policies to address the threat of Covid-19 to employees, clients, and the community. Appendix A includes the case in its entirety. The case is based on interviews with employees of the actual drug/rehab center and represents the situation of the organization as closely as possible. A quality ethics case presents decisions that are not easily labeled unethical. Hindsight is an easy crutch we should not lean on if our goal is to enhance the ethics assessment skills of students. This case presents a decision that can be justified or labeled unethical depending on the ethical perspectives used and applied. The language of the case and the questions of the worksheet present material so that students are challenged to think critically from perhaps new perspectives about the issues.

The case is used in the capstone Strategic Management course required of all business majors at Eastern Illinois University. In this course, assessment data are collected measuring students' abilities to assess ethical dilemmas. As the final "core" course for business majors, it is an excellent opportunity to capture a snapshot of students' ethical assessment skills and how far they have progressed during their time in the School of Business. Certainly, this case could be used in a variety of courses, not just Strategic Management. But in this course, two one-hour, fifteen-minute class periods are devoted to the topic of Ethics; plus the essay question on an exam. In the first of the two class periods, the five-question ethical analysis framework that is used for the worksheet is introduced. These five questions and the worksheet are presented in Appendix B. Typically, a different case is used to illustrate how to use the framework. Recently, I have been using the Nestle Infant Formula case as an example. Most of the time of the first class session is

used to cover five different ethical perspectives that can be used to complete the third question in the framework. The five ethical perspectives covered include Utilitarian, Individual Rights, Distributive Justice, Practical Rule, and Golden Rule. The second class session is spent as a workshop during which time students read a new case (most recently a workplace drug-testing case) and complete a practice worksheet with direct feedback from the instructor in real time. Students who attend both days typically perform very well on the essay exam using the Covid-19 case described here. Student work is evaluated using the rubric included in Appendix C. This rubric was developed by faculty at Eastern Illinois University more than 10 years ago and has been used effectively since then.

Hopefully this article stimulates thinking regarding effective ethics coverage options for Management and other business-discipline courses. Use of the case in classes is absolutely welcome, but publication of the case or use for profit is not the intention of this paper and would violate copyright protections. The world is a complicated place: there are not very many clear-cut ethics situations with absolute rights and wrongs, heroes and villains. This case provides an example of an actual situation in which the ethical implications are more nuanced and representative of the situations students are more likely to face. Preparing students to more effectively engage with a world in which people see things with different lenses, act with conflicting values, and sometimes demand compliance in the form of questionable behaviors is the goal of this case and the ethics coverage described herein.

APPENDIX A CASE

A Thanksgiving without Family: Covid-19 Employer Dilemma

By Thanksgiving 2020, nearly 60 million official cases of Covid-19 had been recorded around the world with over 12 million of those cases occurring in the U.S. where about 260,000 Americans had died to Covid or Covid-related illnesses (nearly 40% of the deaths were linked to nursing homes or other long-term care facilities). In the Spring of 2020, the governors of many states issued lockdowns of various businesses deemed non-essential and issued shelter-in-place orders for the general public. Mask-wearing and social distancing became the norm for about 80% of Americans and millions of Americans worked and attended school from home.

But for some essential businesses, remote work was not a possibility; either due to the physical nature of the work, security concerns, technological restrictions, or other reasons. For these businesses, there was a significant concern about balancing the safety of employees, clients, and the community along with completing the mission of the organization.

One such organization in Central Illinois was an alcohol and drug rehabilitation center we will call CIDAR (Central Illinois Drug & Alcohol Rehabilitation). CIDAR's work involved providing residential rehabilitation services for people struggling with alcohol, drug, or other addictive behaviors. Most clients of CIDAR lived in a strictly controlled environment where there was no access to drugs or alcohol. CIDAR counselors met with clients daily many times, and other employees monitored clients to make sure rules were adhered to.

The Executive Director of CIDAR was very concerned that if an employee was Covid-positive and interacted with clients, Covid-19 could race through the entire client population with disastrous results. Many nursing homes and other group home settings had already experienced these devastating impacts from Covid-19. She therefore instituted strict social-distancing and masking guidelines for both employees and clients.

In addition, she began requiring employees to report to her how they were spending their time outside of work. Did they travel to states with higher incidences of Covid-19? Did they frequent bars or nightclubs? Did they participate in activities with more than 10 people? Employees were generally compliant and did not engage in high-risk activities knowing how important it was to keep Covid-19 away from the residential clients.

But then came new Thanksgiving protocols, and some employees began to resist and claim that the Executive Director had gone too far. Specifically, she required that all employees submit a form stating how they spent Thanksgiving: where did they travel, with whom did they spend the holiday, from where did those people come, and how many people were gathered in one place. If the Executive Director deemed the employee's Thanksgiving plans were unsafe, the employee would be required to self-quarantine for 14 days. During this time, the employee would NOT be paid and would be responsible for providing evidence of a negative Covid-19 test in order to return to work.

Is the Executive Director acting in an ethical manner?

APPENDIX B

Student Assignment Worksheet – Ethics Case Analysis

For the mini-case provided (Covid Employer Dilemma), please answer the following:

What is the primary ethical dilemma faced in this case? What secondary issues are there?

Which stakeholders will be impacted by the decisions and how?

How would the issues in this case be viewed using different ethical theories?

What options does/did the organization have? What are the ramifications of those options?

What recommendation would you, personally, make to the organization?

Justify your recommendation. Describe its implementation.

APPENDIX C

Ethical Analysis Rubric

	Emerging 1 -----2	Developing 3 -----4	Mastering 5 -----6
Identification of Ethical Issues	- Provides little or no discussion of ethical dilemma or relevant facts - Does not identify the ethical issues or inaccurately identifies the ethical issue	- Discusses the ethical dilemma including some relevant facts - Identifies ethical issue but may be unclear or incomplete	- Fully discusses the ethical dilemma including all relevant facts - Clearly states the primary ethical issues - Identifies secondary and implicit issues
Consideration of Stakeholders	- Does not identify stakeholders - Inaccurately identifies stakeholders	- Identifies stakeholders but may ignore some stakeholders - Identifies or implies potential impact on stakeholders	- Clearly identifies all stakeholders - Fully discusses potential impact on stakeholders
Analysis of Issue from Multiple Ethical Theories or Perspectives	- Provides cursory analysis of ethical issue and/or analyzes issue from one theory/perspective - Fails to identify and describe appropriate ethical theories/perspectives - Applies ethical theory/perspective in simplistic or mechanical way	- Adequately analyzes issues applying multiple ethical theories/perspectives - Describes appropriate ethical theories/perspectives but description may be unclear or inaccurate - Applies ethical theories/perspectives of theories but fails to fully clarify issues or provide basis for decision-making	- Thoroughly analyzes issue applying multiple appropriate ethical theories - Clearly and accurately describes appropriate ethical theories/perspectives - Fully applies ethical theories/perspectives to facts clarifying issues and providing basis for decision-making
Discussion of Options	- Fails to identify options for resolving dilemma or identifies only one option for resolving dilemma - Limited or no incorporation of ethical theories/perspectives and consideration of stakeholders	- Describes at least two options for resolving dilemma - Discusses some potential ramifications of options - Incorporates ethical theories/perspectives and consideration of stakeholders but discussion may be unclear, disjointed or superficial	- Clearly identifies and describes various options for resolving dilemma - Clearly discusses potential ramifications of various options - Effectively integrates various ethical theories/perspectives and consideration of stakeholders in discussion of options
Proposal of Decision	- Fails to propose decision for resolution or proposes decision for resolution with little or no support - Fails to relate proposed decision to analysis of issues and options	- Proposes decision for resolution supported by reasoning - Relates proposed decision to analysis of issues and options - May provide some suggestions for implementation	- Clearly proposes decision for resolution supported by logical and thorough reasoning - Proposed decision fully integrates analysis of issues and options - Formulates clear implementation plan