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What Should I Do? Building the Capacity of New Leaders to Make Ethical Decisions

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Abstract

This article introduces a decision-making framework designed for emerging leaders in child and youth-serving organizations and demonstrates how such a process can be used to thread ethical considerations into decisions. This article highlights the intersection between decision-making, ethics, and leadership through a brief review of a selection of existing decision-making models and the introduction of a decision-making process developed specifically for emerging child and youth care leaders. The rationale behind the development of the model is included as is information obtained from emerging leaders, supervisors, and directors who have provided feedback since the initial development of the model in 2006. Guidelines for the use of the tool, sample scenarios for professional development, and potential adaptations are also described.

Keywords: Ethics, Decision, Leader, Supervisor, Director, and Development

Learning Goals:

- Explore the Decision Wheel with a focus on its grassroots development and potential use with emerging leaders.
- Examine the connection between intentional decision-making processes and maintaining ethical standards.
- Review suggested uses for the Decision Wheel, which will integrate scenarios and use of the Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals (2023).

Historically, the field of child and youth work has lacked formalized decision-making processes in training new leaders. Decisions are often made through observation or trial and error rather than through intentional, reflective practice. The topic is of critical importance because effective ethical decision-making is fundamental to the leadership roles within child and youth care settings, directly influencing the quality of services provided to children, youth, and families. Ethical dilemmas in child and youth care are complex, involving competing priorities, diverse investor interests, and the demand for rapid yet thoughtful decision-making. Without clear and structured guidance, emerging leaders may lack the confidence or capability to make decisions that align with professional standards, potentially resulting in inconsistent or unethical outcomes. As the challenges faced by child and youth care professionals become increasingly multifaceted in light of shifting social and technological landscapes, a grassroots-developed tool like the Decision Wheel is crucial for ensuring ethical leadership that fosters both individual and organizational integrity.

In the following article, we introduce a decision-making model that may be particularly suited for the ethical challenges encountered by direct care and leadership within of the child and youth work. While numerous ethical decision-making frameworks exist across various disciplines, the Decision Wheel—a structured, multi-dimensional framework for leadership and decision-making—is distinctive in its integration of the specific ethical, practical, and relational considerations that are unique to this field. Additionally, the framework aligns with the 2023 revision of the Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals, ensuring its relevance and applicability to current professional standards. By offering this model, the paper enhances the discourse on leadership development and ethical practice in child and youth care, providing a practical tool that addresses existing gaps in training and support for emerging leaders.

Leadership and Decision-Making in Child and Youth Work

The field of leadership theory is broad, and while well-published, has not been extensively researched to demonstrate an evidence base for the passion and commitment followers have for various models. Three such models have wide recognition.

Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership theory dates back to 1972 and has been utilized in both the public and private sector to define aspects of competence and commitment of employees and the relationship of these characteristics to methods of supervision. (Thompson and Vecchio, 2009) Transformational leadership inspires meaningful change. Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leaders as those who help followers grow into leaders by responding to individual needs, aligning objectives, and fostering group and organizational cohesion. Transactional leadership reflects perhaps the most common behavioral industry dynamic of an exchange of performance for reward. The leader recognizes a job well done which compels the employee to strive for additional recognition by demonstrating increased effort. (Xenikou, 2016)

Khan and Nawaz (2016) completed a review and comparison of leadership models with the following findings. In general (the models) "can be categorized firstly by the relationship (between leader and led), secondly, the personal qualities of leader and last but not the least, his/her skills relevant to the tasks assigned. Among all the prominent theories, there exists a general view that the word leadership is actually a process comprised of leaders' impact upon the group of people unless and until the tasks are achieved."

If the general view of effective leadership links directly to outcomes and task accomplishment, surely the development of decision-making skills is a key component in the professional development of new managers, directors and supervisors.

Leadership in child and youth care work is a demanding role that requires the ability to make quick, yet thoughtful decisions in dynamic and often unpredictable environments. Leaders in this field face complex challenges, including ethical dilemmas, diverse client needs, and the responsibility to safeguard the well-being of vulnerable populations. Often, these decisions have significant consequences, affecting not only the children and families served but also the organizational culture and staff morale. Despite the high stakes, many emerging leaders are left to navigate decision-making through informal methods, such as mimicking the actions of more experienced colleagues. This reliance on ad hoc approaches can lead to inconsistent decisions, posing risks to both the quality of care and organizational coherence.

An adaptive, multidimensional framework for decision-making is essential in addressing these challenges. Adaptive leadership, characterized by flexibility and responsiveness to changing circumstances, is particularly relevant in child and youth care work, where practitioners must continuously respond to evolving client needs, family dynamics, and broader societal issues. Leaders must integrate multiple dimensions of decision-making: ethical considerations such as safeguarding confidentiality and respecting cultural diversity, relational factors including managing power dynamics with staff and clients, and practical concerns like aligning with organizational policies and resource allocation. A structured, multidimensional decision-making process allows leaders to weigh all relevant factors, ensuring that decisions are not only effective but also align with the ethical standards and values of the organization.

A framework like the Decision Wheel enhances leadership by providing a structured tool that supports reflective, intentional decision-making. By guiding leaders through multiple considerations—such as organizational priorities, ethical principles, and the potential relational impact of their choices—the framework helps to build confidence and clarity in decision-making processes. Such a tool is particularly valuable in child and youth care settings, where decisions must often be made under pressure and with incomplete information. By promoting consistency, transparency, and accountability, a multidimensional framework like the Decision Wheel not only strengthens the leadership capacity of emerging leaders but also fosters a more ethical and cohesive organizational culture.

Decision Wheel: A Brief History

The Decision Wheel originated in 2004 during a middle-management retreat aimed at providing technical assistance for programs by programs (TAPP) approach, hosted by a regional training provider now integrated into National Safe Place Network (NSPN). During this annual retreat, participants representing child and youth care organizations routinely discussed challenges associated with their roles. Many of these new leaders were selected for increased responsibilities due to their excellence as child and youth care workers; yet, the majority of these individuals shared significant needs regarding building their confidence in decision-making. The common refrain was that they learned to make decisions by shadowing supervisors and while this technique was useful, it only taught them to do what they saw others do. The wheel was

conceptualized as a tool to help new directors and supervisors learn and remember the multiple considerations that affect decisions in nonprofit organizations.

In the years following the initial introduction of the Decision Wheel development of the model continued. Groups representing youth, direct care personnel, supervisors, clinicians, and executives contributed to the clarity of the need for each of the considerations represented as segments on the wheel. Various groups had different perspectives on essential elements. For example, youth felt participation and partnership were important and representative of how they should be valued as experts in their own lives. Supervisors and managers often focused on procedures and practicality while executives discussed the importance of policies, precedent and purview.

Since formal development, the sixteen considerations in the decision wheel have been included in each Emerging Leaders Institute (ELI) led by NSPN. This virtual learning event brings together self-identified emerging leaders and a portion of content is specific to decision-making. More than a decade later, individuals continue reporting confidence concerns and acknowledge that, prior to attending ELI, they had received no specific training in decision-making within their jobs (NSPN, 2019 – 2024). In addition, more than 93% indicate no familiarity with a code of ethics beyond that offered by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (NSPN, 2016 – 2024) and more recently, 90% of participants confirmed ethical considerations were only discussed as an element of risk mitigation (NSPN, 2022 – 2024).

The Link between Decision-Making and Ethics

The intersection of decision-making, ethics, and leadership is clear and well documented and there is no shortage of decision-making models focused on ethics. Various industries have created frameworks for this purpose including project managers (Project Management Institute, 2021); marketing professionals (Sriska, 2004); health care (IDEA, 2013); social work (Manitoba College of Social Work, 2021), and even investment professionals (CFA Institute, 2017). In fact, Suarez, Marya, Weiss, & Cox “identified 55 ethical decision-making models across 60 peer-reviewed articles, seven primary professions (e.g., medicine, psychology), and 22 subfields (e.g., dentistry, family medicine)” (2022). The process of “doing ethics” includes various perspectives and was recently highlighted in a text specific to the child and youth care field (Mann-Feder et. al., 2021). These frameworks share common aspects such as identifying the issue, assessing options, consulting applicable codes, acting on information, and evaluating the impact. However, in youth service organizations, the training and support provided to new supervisors, directors, and managers is uneven across these topics. How do you know what your organization will or will not consider an ethical issue? How do you know what options may be considered? How do you understand how to navigate organizational systems when the issue is at odds with organizational policy? When mid-level leaders of organizations served by NSPN were asked what training was provided to them specific to decision-making, the most common response provided was “none”. Although various models exist to aid decision-making, youth care workers engaged in NSPN training frequently report learning through observation rather than structured guidance. This may result in the practice of mimicking responses in various situations rather than making decisions that truly reflect unique circumstances across various settings. When considering the multi-level impact of effective and ineffective responses to ethical concerns, the ability to make decisions becomes critical. Kirk shares, “ethical leaders aren’t just born with these skills – they develop them over years of experience and training” (2014)

The question evolved. Could the Decision Wheel be utilized to help emerging leaders consider standards of care and help them process less obvious considerations? This question is aligned with the work of scholars Mann-Feder and Stackley who created a “Reflexive Model for Ethical Decision-Making in Child and Youth Care” (2021). These authors write “ethical decision-making methods do not make decisions for you, but they help you to avoid decisions based purely in impulse or professional hunches.” Therein lies the value of models specific to helping emerging leaders understand considerations which, in conjunction with guidance offered by ethical decision-making models, can strengthen understanding and create positive, ethical results.

The Decision Wheel – A Form and Function Overview

The Decision Wheel (Image 1), titled “Decision Making Success,” is a circular diagram divided into four quadrants, each representing distinct aspects of decision-making. Users are not required to process the quadrants or layers sequentially; the design allows for flexible movement among considerations based on relevance and context. Each quadrant reflects a unique decision-making focus, emphasizing practical, relational, structural, or innovative considerations. This multi-dimensional approach provides a comprehensive framework for effective decision-making. When training emerging leaders with the Decision Wheel, a key principle is recognizing that achieving 100% consensus on decisions is often unrealistic. However, by examining decisions through the diverse perspectives of those they lead, leaders can foster greater understanding and respect for their choices.

Why a wheel? Decisions propel individuals forward when positive outcomes are recognized and reinforced. Conversely, ambiguous results or unclear paths can leave individuals feeling stuck, spinning without momentum. Poor decisions serve as fuel for life’s journey, making the wheel a fitting symbol for this process.

The Decision Wheel’s color-coded categories signify distinct perspectives: Green emphasizes structure, order, sequence, and methods. Blue highlights objective data, logic, analysis, and processes. Yellow represents intuition, inclusivity, connection, and the synthesis of diverse viewpoints. Red focuses on relationships, encompassing emotional, creative, and reactive elements.

Image 1



Training emerging leaders goes beyond simply defining the Decision Wheel's categories. Effective knowledge and skill transfer occur when trainers and supervisors engage leaders in identifying and applying these areas independently. One supportive method involves offering guiding questions (Image 2) aligned with each category while highlighting that answers may vary for most decisions. New leaders, who may be unfamiliar with this variability, benefit from understanding that not all considerations apply to every decision. When watching experienced leaders make decisions it seems fluid and almost effortless. However, when asking these same leaders how they arrived at the decisions, they will share the multiple factors considered. For some needs, the decision seems instantaneous while others require extended time and processes. New leaders should consider the multiple factors to determine if they apply, and if so, how. The more often they use the wheel, the more quickly they can hone in on essential aspects.

Image 2

Philosophy	What do you believe and what does your organization believe about our world and how we function in it? What does your personal and organization mission statement say?
Principles	What foundational principles should be considered? Do you have personal or professional principles or values that will drive your decision? Are these principles aligned with identified ethical standards?
Participation	Is there time to involve others? If so, who, why, and under what circumstances? Are stakeholders, including service recipients involved? How will you inform others of the decision?
Polarization	Will the impact of the decision bring people together? Isolate certain segments or individuals? If so, is this necessary and can it be justified?
Precedent	Will the decision follow or create precedent? Can, should, and does precedent exist outside of policy? Is the willingness to set or change a precedent a personal or organizational preference?
Perspectives	How do different members of the team view the need? Do different generational perspectives apply? Is there sufficient distance from a crisis or negative situation to think through solutions clearly?
Potential	What is the potential benefit and consequence of the decision for those involved? The organization? The community?
Partnerships	How do you engage others in ongoing support of the decision and in the result? How do you celebrate the contributions of all involved?
Priority	Where does this decision rank in relation to others that must be made? Where does your sense of priority originate? Does it depend on who asked you to make the decision and under what circumstances?

Policies	Are there existing policies to address the issue? When was the policy created? By whom and why? Should the policies be revised?
Procedures	Is there a designated procedure to address the issue or for making the decision? Are the procedures familiar to all involved? Do procedures help or interfere? Are procedures reflective of ethical considerations?
Practice	At what point does the decision and the product become the norm for you, staff, and the organization? How is understanding and support created with new stakeholders?
Purview	Is it your decision to make? Make it alone? Would others agree?
Purpose	What is the purpose of the decision to be made? Why is a decision needed?
Products	What is the concrete and/or abstract result of the decision? Are there primary and secondary results? How will you measure success?
Practical	Can you and/or should you engage others? Does the timeline and importance of the decision outweigh practicality? Do current resources support the decision?

Use with the Standards

The 2022 revision of the Standards of Care for North American Child and Youth Care Professionals, published in 2023 by the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP), defines principles and standards across six key areas. The six areas include: (1) Personal Commitment to Ethical Practice; (2) Ethical Practice with Children, Youth, and Families; (3) Ethical Practice within Organizations; (4) Advancing the Field of Child and Youth Work; (5) Ethical Representation of the Child and Youth Care (CYC) Profession in the Community; and (6) Ethical Commitments of CYC Leadership. The areas of the standard are infused with specific guidance on principles that affect the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families as well as the effectiveness and professionalism of child and youth care workers. As such, supporting emerging leaders in using the standards as a source for decision-making is not only practice – it is essential to reducing risk and promoting success. The Harvard Business Review reflects “It turns out that people don’t necessarily lead the way they think; they decide differently in front of a crowd than they do in front of a mirror.” Strengthening the decision-making skills of emerging leaders may

assist with helping them know what to do, when to do it, and how to stand behind what they have done.

Use of Scenarios to Amplify the Standards

Each supervisor or trainer may have a wealth of scenarios on hand that are most applicable to the type of organization and populations served. While much training emphasizes reducing organizational risk and ensuring safety, scenarios reflecting day-to-day activities are equally valuable for building confidence and analyzing which Decision Wheel factors apply in specific contexts.

Scenarios – Included are sample scenario to prompt discussions with individuals or teams. Readers are encouraged to develop additional scenarios tailored to their programs and organizational contexts.

Personal Commitment to Ethical Practice

- Two employees in different departments begin a romantic relationship. The company has no policy on interoffice relationships, but there are concerns about potential conflicts of interest or favoritism if the relationship becomes public knowledge.
- When reviewing the file of a potential program participant, a worker reads the youth has a history of substance abuse. The worker agrees to try working with the youth though is not optimistic as those with histories of substance abuse are rarely motivated to work a program.

Ethical Practice with Children, Youth, and Families

- An 18-year-old youth approaches an employee with lived experience asking to stay in a vacant garage apartment owned by the employee. The employee is frustrated with red tape with the systems of care and knows the youth is unwilling to stay in an adult shelter.
- A resource specialist is tasked with making applicable referrals as part of creating transition plans. The specialist recognizes a potential referral to a community partner is a challenge as the client has had difficult experiences in group settings. The client indicates refusal to participate in group activities and yet this referral is the only one available without a waiting list.

Ethical Practice within Organizations

- An employee uses company equipment, like a printer or a laptop, for personal projects outside of work hours. The company does not have a specific policy prohibiting this, but it may affect wear and tear or raise questions about fairness among employees.

- An employee regularly comes in late but stays late to make up for it. There is no clear policy on flexible work hours, and other employees begin to question whether this is fair or if they can do the same.

Advancing the Field of Child and Youth Work

- A director asks a program manager to participate in a community coalition to promote enhanced access to supportive housing resources. The program manager refuses, as the lead for the coalition is a community organization that previously employed the manager. The manager shares multiple stories of inefficiencies, territorialism, and lack of professionalism within the other organization.
- Employees within an organization are asked to review two field-related articles a year and to post comments on an organization's community thread. An employee refuses to participate in the process as the employee considers it to be unrelated to daily expectations.

Ethical Representation of the CYC Profession in the Community

- An employee posts controversial personal opinions on social media that could be associated with their professional identity. The company has no clear social media policy, and the posts do not directly mention the company but could still reflect poorly.
- An employee takes on freelance work in the same industry, potentially competing with their employer. The company does not have a non-compete clause or policy addressing side jobs, but there could be a conflict of interest or divided loyalty.

Ethical Commitments of CYC Leadership

- A manager develops a close friendship with one of their direct reports. This leads to perceptions of favoritism, even though the manager believes they are being fair. The company lacks a policy on managing personal relationships that might affect professional judgment.
- A supervisor accidentally overhears sensitive information about a potential merger or acquisition of an organizational partner. The supervisor shares the information with a direct report to build relationship and gain trust.

Utilizing the Decision Wheel with Emerging Leaders – Activity Overview

Materials: digital or printed versions of the Decision Wheel, the descriptor questions, the Standards, and selected scenarios.

Time: The Decision Wheel is versatile and can be used with individuals during weekly supervision, team meetings, training sessions, or onboarding for new managers. The duration varies based on discussion points, ranging from an hour to multiple sessions, allowing for deeper engagement over time.

Procedures:

- Introduce the activity with an explanation of the importance of effective decision-making and the connection to ethical practice.
- Share the Decision Wheel and the list of considerations and ask for clarification regarding any of the question prompts.
- Provide a scenario and ask the employee to assess which area(s) of the standards are most applicable.
- Ask the employee to determine which considerations of the Decision Wheel should be addressed with alternate endings based on the answers to the prompt questions. For example, if the participant feels that it is necessary to examine if the response to a situation would be polarizing and set a precedent – ask for a description of what aspects of the decision would be polarizing and what precedent would be set. This follow-up will include a deeper understanding.
- Review with the employee and share your perspectives on other considerations and similarities or differences in selected approach.
- Identify takeaway for each discussion.

Potential Adaptations

If using the Decision Wheel to address real situations within organizations, preface the work with if and how the practice will be utilized to affect the identified situation. For example, if you ask an employee to use the Decision Wheel to determine next steps for an ongoing need or challenge, clearly state if the employee is being asked to make the decision or to recommend potential decisions for consideration. It is common for individuals to focus on the areas of the wheel most aligned with their own preferences. For example, an employee most focused on emotions and relationship may focus primarily on those considerations in the Decision Wheel for every scenario. Scenarios intentionally designed to challenge an individual's comfort zone foster deeper learning and enhance adaptability in decision-making.

The Decision Wheel may be used with a staff team. Divide the group into pairs or teams and ask each group to identify potential scenarios that reflect the areas of the Decision Wheel as well as a particular area of the standards. Switch the unlabeled scenarios between groups and ask each group to identify applicable considerations, standards, and potential solutions.

When addressing performance concerns, which often reflect poor decision-making, consider using the Decision Wheel and the standards to support the need for improvement and suggestions for future focus.

Context and Next Steps

The Decision Wheel, as a standalone tool for training and ongoing support of emerging leaders, has not been empirically researched or validated. The grassroots development and usage of the tool has centered primarily within one network, an association of youth and family service providers. The tool has been utilized for more than twenty years as a resource to guide new learners through the quadrants and layers of the wheel.

A logical next step involves opportunities for academic review and objective evaluation of the Decision Wheel's application in the field. One potential design involves training one group of new hires with both the Decision Wheel and the Standards and a second group with the Standards alone. Ongoing data collection could then focus on the confidence level of the employee in making decisions and supervisory ratings of each employee as related to leadership recognition and impact on the team. While this option would not support a causal relationship determination, it would provide additional objective data to support the surface validity of the tool as a resource for professional development.

As new staff, supervisors, managers, and directors learn to make decisions, their ability to assess, prioritize, and explain the rationale behind decisions will improve. As decisions improve, so does the ability to maintain alignment with standards of care. When describing the value of an ethics-based decision process, Curry writes "Training and development professionals and supervisors should not only promote awareness of the process but also provide opportunities to practice the process with potential ethical situations." (311).

Conclusion

This article explored the Decision Wheel and how it can enhance the development of decision-making capacity of emerging leaders in child and youth serving organizations. When compared with existing decision-making models, an area of divergence is the specific considerations outlined which, while common across organizational practice, are not emphasized as areas of focus for child and youth care workers who have been promoted to leadership positions. Child and youth care workers who mimic the decisions of others may find the results to be less permanent or effective if they do not comprehend the rationale for the decision and how it may affect other stakeholders. From the Harvard Business Review, "Although the least successful managers do notice, at around the director level, that something has changed, they can't figure out what they should do differently". Leaders are often judged by the decisions they make. These decisions affect the quality of care for children and youth as well as the culture and climate of organizations. Empowering leaders to make confident decisions enhances their capacity to lead ethically and effectively. Tools like the Decision Wheel offer a practical means to help emerging leaders build confidence in their decision-making and effectively communicate their choices.

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