Step 4: Act—Do *I* have the courage to do what I know is right?

Step 4: Act

This is often the hardest step of all to take, since ethical action often requires courage. The whistle-blower who risks losing her job, the young man confronting the tanks in Tiananmen Square, the elected official standing up for what she knows to be right when it will probably cost her the next election, or even something as mundane as risking the ridicule of your friends because you refuse to go along with whatever questionable activities they are engaging in for "fun." Ask yourself the question: "Do *I* have the courage to do what I know is right?"

EXAMPLE 2-5

Your company has been granted a contract to develop the next generation of electronic cigarette, also known as a "nicotine delivery system," and you have been assigned to the design team. Can you in good conscience contribute your expertise to this project?

NOTE

In the interest of brevity, this is not an exhaustive analysis but shows the general procedure.

Step 1: *Identify the issues (What) and the stakeholders (Who).*

Issues:

- *Nicotine is poisonous and addictive.*
- *These devices eliminate many of the harmful components of tobacco smoke.*
- *Laws concerning these devices range from completely legal, to classification as a medical device, to banned, depending on country.*
- *There are claims that such devices can help wean tobacco addicts off nicotine.*
- *The World Health Organization does not consider this an effective means to stop smoking.*
- *Whether an individual chooses to use nicotine should be a personal decision, since its use does not generally degrade a person's function in society.*
- *The carrier of the nicotine (80%–90% of the total inhaled product) is propylene glycol, which is relatively safe, but can cause skin and eye irritation, as well as other adverse effects in doses much larger than would be obtained from this device.*
- *A profit can be made from nicotine products or anti-smoking devices.*

Stakeholders:

- *You (your job and promotions)*
- *Your company and stockholders (profit)*
- *Cigarette manufacturers and their employees and stockholders (lost revenue)*
- *Tobacco farmers (less demand)*
- *The public (less second-hand smoke)*
- *The user (various health effects, possibly positive or negative)*

Step 2: *Analyze alternative courses of action from different perspectives.*

1. *Consequences*
   - *You may lose your job or promotion if you refuse.*
   - *If you convince management to abandon the project, the company may lose money.*
   - *If you succeed brilliantly, your company may make money hand over fist, and you receive a promotion.*
   - *If the project goes ahead, the possibility of future lawsuits exists.*
   - *Users' health may be damaged.*
   - *Users' dependence on nicotine may either increase or decrease.*

2. *Intent*

   - *Should everyone use electronic cigarettes, or at least condone their use?*
   - *Should use of electronic cigarettes be unrestricted by law?*
   - *Would I like to risk nicotine addiction because of using these devices?*
   - *Would I be able to kick my tobacco habit by using these devices?*

3. *Character*

   - *Would a person of good character develop this device, use it, or condone its use?*
   - *Would work on this project (thus implicitly condoning its use) or use of the device itself enhance or degrade my character?*
   - *Would my personal spiritual leader, or other person I revere, condone development or use of this product?*

Step 3: Correlate perspectives

Here we enter the realm of subjective judgment. The individual author responsible for this example has a definite personal answer, but it is in the nature of ethical decision-making that different people will often arrive at different results in good conscience. You would have to weigh the various factors (including any that have been overlooked or knowingly omitted) to arrive at your own conclusion. We refuse to dictate a decision to you.

***Step 4:** Act on your decision*

If your decision was that working on this project poses no threat to your soul (if you happen to believe in such), probably little courage is required to follow through, since your career may blossom, or at least not be curtailed.

On the other hand, if you believe that the project is unethical, you need to have the intestinal fortitude to either attempt to change the minds of management or refuse to work on the project, both of which may put your career at risk.

2.2 ENGINEERING CREED

Ethical decisions in engineering have, in general, a narrow focus specific to the problems that arise when designing and producing products or services of a technical nature. Engineers and scientists have, by the very nature of their profession, a body of specialized knowledge that is understood only vaguely, if at all, by most of the population. This knowledge can be used for tremendous good in society, but can also cause untold mischief when used by unscrupulous practitioners. Various engineering organizations have thus developed codes of conduct specific to the profession. Perhaps the most well known is the Code of Ethics for Engineers developed by the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE). The entire NSPE Code of Ethics is rather long, so we list only the Engineer's Creed and the Fundamental Canons of the Code here.