Moral Compass Quiz

Lafayette Leadership Institute Conference
Alan W. Childs, PhD
February 7, 2004

Answer these questions as honestly as you can, indicating what you believe you would actually do, and not what you think you should say. You may mark more than one answer per question, as long as the answers are consistent.

1. You want to go to a university in a different state to be with your friends, but in order to do so, you would have to say you live with your aunt who resides in that state. If your parents and aunt would let you, would you lie about where you live?

   a. Yes. Nothing is more important than my education.
   b. Yes. Any rule that would make it more expensive for me to go to a school I want to attend is unfair.
   c. Yes, if I know lots of other people give false addresses.
   d. No. If I got caught, I could get into trouble, and it would be embarrassing.
   e. No. It is unfair to the students and their parents who tell the truth.
   f. No. It would be dishonest.

2. You look much younger than you are. You could save $24 at an amusement park if you lie about your age. Would you do it?

   a. Yes. I need the money more than they do.
   b. Yes. It’s unfair to make people pay more just because they’re older.
   c. Yes, if I couldn’t afford to pay the full price.
   d. No. It is unfair to the people who play by the rules.
   e. No. It is dishonest.
3. You have a scholarship worth $15,000, which in order to keep you must get at least a B average this semester. You doubt whether you can get a good grade in your physics class. You meet with the physics teacher after class. She is kind and supportive and says you’ll find a way. She asks you to wait while she goes to the restroom. She glances at a folder on her desk and leaves the room. The folder is marked “Physics Final,” and it’s full of copies of the test. You think the teacher might have deliberately left the room so you could take a copy. Would you do it?

   a. Yes, but only if I was pretty sure the teacher wanted me to.
   b. Yes. Even is she didn’t do it on purpose, she was foolish to leave the exams that way.
   c. Yes, but only if I was sure I would not get caught.
   d. Yes. The grade’s just too important.
   e. No. If I got caught I could lose the scholarship completely.
   f. No. I would not betray the trust of my teacher or others who know me.
   g. No. Cheating is wrong.

4. You are the captain of your college tennis team, one of the best in the conference. The coach is new and doesn’t know the players. One player has to be cut. The coach asks you, as captain, to decide which of two players should stay on the team. One is your best friend, who really wants to play, but the other player is better and could help the team more. Would you choose your friend?

   a. Yes. Loyalty is very important.
   b. Yes, because of the golden rule. If our positions were reversed, I would want my friend to choose me.
   c. No. My duty to the team is to select the best player.
   d. No. I would not like it if the coach selected players on the basis of whom he liked rather than playing skill.
   e. No. It is in my own best interests to have the best players possible.
   f. No. It would be unfair to the other, better player.
5. A good friend confides that her boyfriend, a star on one of the college's most successful athletic teams, raped her. She makes you promise not to tell anyone, but her grades are slipping and she'll lose her chance to go to medical school. Now she comes to meetings and other social activities drunk and is getting into silly fights with her friends. You try to talk to her about counseling, but she refuses. She even talks about killing herself. Would you keep your promise and say nothing?

   a. Yes. Friendship requires me to be loyal to my promise.
   b. Yes. If I said anything, her reputation would suffer.
   c. Yes. Nobody would believe me.
   d. No. Friendship requires me to look out for her best interests, and in this case she needs help.
   e. No. Her health and welfare are more important than our friendship.
   f. No. The football player may do the same to others unless he is stopped.

6. You're in debt and badly need a bank loan that you wouldn't get unless you understated the amount you owe. Would you do it?

   a. Yes, but only if there was really was no other way to get the loan.
   b. Yes, if I knew I could pay back the loan. No one would be hurt.
   c. Yes. If the bank doesn't verify my debts, it must not be too important.
   d. Yes, but only if I was sure I would not get caught.
   e. No. It's a crime; I might get caught.
   f. No, because it is wrong.
7. You are a parent of an 11th-grader who has a big test today that will determine her grade in an important course. She asks you to let her school so she’ll have more time to study. Because she feels stress, she wants you to write a note to the school saying she was ill. Would you let her stay home?

a. Yes, if I believed she’d really worked hard to study but needed more time.
b. Yes. Her grades are very important for getting into the right college.
c. Yes. If she were stressed, I wouldn’t be lying if I said she was ill.
d. Yes, but I would be honest about the reason and let the teacher decide the proper consequences.
e. No. I want her to be responsible; if she is not prepared, she should suffer the consequences.
f. No. It would be unfair to the other kids who have to take the test today.

Adapted from: Ethics: Easier Said Than Done, by Michael S. Josephson (Bantam).
Moral Compass Quiz Considerations

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1. Lying and evading rules for personal self-interest is unethical no matter how desirable the fruits of the lie may be. A is misleading not only because the statement is too strong (there are things more important than education), but also because it is deceptive: The real reason was to be with your friends. Finally, one could pursue one’s best education without lying. A rule is not unfair (B) simply because it deprives us of what we want. In any event, cheating on the system does not make it fairer. In fact, it makes it less fair, because only those who obey the rules are denied what they want (C). The “everyone is doing it” argument does not create an ethical justification. D is based not on moral principle but on self-interest. The ethics of an act are not determined by whether you are punished. E and F are good options; you could have marked them both.

2. Lying about your age is unethical (because it’s dishonest) and unfair (because people who play by the rules are disadvantaged), and it violates fundamental notions of citizenship. A, B and C pose excuses with no moral validity. Both D and E are correct in reasoning and result.

3. A is unacceptable. Even if the teacher lets you cheat, cheating is cheating. You should reject B because it seeks to put the responsibility on the teacher to prevent your cheating rather than on you not to cheat. Fear of getting caught (C) is not a moral reason to do anything. D simply makes it clear that ethics sometimes require us to sacrifice self-interest. E shows the long-term self-interest in honesty, but is not essentially ethical. F is acceptable, because it demonstrates the desire to be worthy of trust. G clearly is an ethical response.

4. Loyalty is an important ethical trait, but only within the framework of other principles. A and B are unacceptable. Responsibility encompasses the notion of duty. C and F are the best responses. D, an acceptable answer, demonstrates that the golden rule could as easily justify choosing on the basis of skill as on the basis of friendship. E demonstrates
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