

The Impact of Ethical Awareness

1. Individual Factors

These are internal, personal qualities that predispose an individual to notice or ignore ethical issues.

- **Moral Philosophy and Values:** An individual's deeply held core values (such as honesty, fairness, respect, and responsibility) and their personal ethical commitments strongly influence what they perceive as an ethical issue. When a situation conflicts with these established values, awareness is triggered.
- **Moral Development Stage:** People at higher stages of moral development, as described by theories like Kohlberg's stages, tend to be more sensitive to complex ethical issues because they consider broader principles (e.g., justice, human rights) rather than just self-interest or rule-following.
- **Cognitive Biases and Self-Awareness:** Unconscious biases can prevent a person from seeing an issue clearly. Conversely, **self-awareness** - the ability to reflect on one's own motivations, emotions, and values - is a key driver of ethical awareness. Recognising one's "gut feeling" or discomfort often signals an ethical dimension.
- **Personal Experience:** Past exposure to ethical dilemmas and the opportunity to reflect on those experiences helps build a cognitive framework for spotting similar issues in the future.
- **Empathy and Compassion:** The ability to understand and share the feelings of others makes one more likely to recognise how a decision might cause harm or violate a right, increasing ethical awareness.

2. Situational/Contextual Factors

These external factors relate to the environment, organisation, or social setting in which the decision is made.

- **Ethical Climate and Culture:** The organisational or social culture plays a major role.
 - An environment where leaders **demonstrate integrity**, set clear ethical expectations, and talk openly about ethics encourages employees and members to be ethically aware.
 - A culture that values **honesty, transparency, and accountability** makes it easier to notice and report ethical concerns.
- **Formal Ethics Mechanisms:** The presence and enforcement of clear, official policies and systems:

- **Codes of Conduct/Ethics:** These documents articulate specific values and expected behaviors, providing a map for navigating dilemmas.
- **Ethics Training Programs:** Structured education helps people learn to identify ethical issues and use ethical decision-making frameworks.
- **Issue Specificity and Intensity:**
 - **Moral Intensity:** The characteristics of the ethical issue itself, such as the magnitude of consequences (how much harm is caused) and social consensus (how much agreement there is that the action is wrong), influence how likely it is to be noticed. A highly consequential, widely agreed-upon ethical violation is easier to spot.
 - **Ethical Language:** Using specific, ethical terminology (e.g., "This is a justice issue" instead of "This is a problem") in communication helps frame a problem as an ethical one.
- **Authority and Group Pressure:** The behavior of direct supervisors, peers, or a professional group can either heighten or suppress awareness. If a focus on a singular goal (like pleasing a boss or meeting a quota) becomes dominant, it can cause **selective attention**, making the ethical dimensions fade into the background.

Developing ethical awareness is a dynamic process that requires both internal reflection and exposure to environments that value and discuss ethical practice.