

Get-Things-Done Approach to Ethics

An interview with Mark Pastin, author of *Make an Ethical Difference*

Mark Pastin is not a fan of books about ethics.

"Most ethics books are ideological instead of addressing how to reach ethical decisions," says the ethics consultant. "As much as I enjoy ethics, I don't enjoy other people telling me what to decide."

But Pastin, CEO of the Council of Ethical Organizations, has ventured into the book world with a desire to be practical and action-oriented — words not often associated with ethics. His recently published book is [Make an Ethical Difference: Tools for Better Action](#).

Pastin's approach is rooted in the idea that, when trying to solve an ethical dilemma, it's more important to agree on an action than to agree on all of the underlying justifications for that action.

"Even if two parties don't agree on big principles of right or wrong, it's possible to arrive at an ethical decision both sides can live with," he says. "Those of us who lead can do the right thing in the situations we influence."

Below, excerpts from a recent interview with CCL.

CCL: You are confident that we can make sound ethical decisions and that we can act on them.

Pastin: Right. People are capable of making the right decisions. They don't need to define an ethical principle or rule to do it. We have the innate ability to see what's right. That was one of my goals in writing the book — to get people to realize they have an "ethics sense." And to recognize that if they have it, then other people do, too.

If you believe in this ethics sense, you can sharpen it. When you trust your ability to see what must be done, you have more confidence in your ability to work with others and do it.

CCL: If we have the desire and innate eye for doing the right thing, why don't we? What gets in the way?

Pastin: A number of things prevent us from behaving in ethical ways. One is the way our beliefs have evolved. If people don't believe they have an ethical sense, then they don't develop it and trust it. We have very poor training in ethics; we need systems and tools and approaches for making ethical decisions, just as we have training and development for anything else.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access



to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the March 2014 issue was author Mark Pastin.

Another reason people don't behave ethically is that we are cynical. We lack confidence that doing the right thing will lead to success. We worry, "If I do the right thing, other people will take advantage of me."

CCL: You've created tools and a process for helping people face ethical dilemmas. How did you come up with the tools?

Pastin: The tools I write about aren't things I created; they came out of experience. I have had opportunities to be side-by-side with leaders who made good, ethical decisions. I wondered what they do that others don't do. That has been the focus of my research since 1986.

The way to navigate an ethical dilemma is to find commonalities. The first step or tool is to read the ground rules. Understand where the other person or party is coming from. Don't ask them — look at what they do and how they behave when they are called upon to act.

Another tool is learning to stand in the shoes of other people. Instead of making assumptions about people and their beliefs, get to know them on a person-to-person basis. Get to know and understand what they will and won't do.

Other elements include identifying facts everyone can agree on and interests everyone has in common. Those become starting points for ethical actions.

CCL: How can we reach ethical agreement with people who seem so different or at odds?

Pastin: The more unlike you that you perceive a person or group to be, the more suspicious you are of their perspective or motives or decisions. We use this sense of difference to limit our interaction or to dismiss the idea that we can come to a decision that all parties agree is ethical.

We are often quick to blame cultural differences — national culture, age, race, ethnicity — when people don't agree with us or understand us. But ethical agreement is possible if you look beyond cultural differences to focus on your common humanity.

Leaders must put a premium on getting to know the people who are affected, especially in any complex situation and when they are looking at a decision or action with significant consequences. Good leaders have a bias for getting close to people; they don't hide behind structures or technology or the HR department or the finance group.

Part of the method for being a good ethical decision-maker is to open yourself up. Involve yourself in the activities you manage, instead of avoiding consequences of what you're doing. Give your inborn ability to make good judgments a chance to operate.