INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS
COMMUNITY CASES

THE ETHICS OF SAYING NO

SUMMARY: Exploring the complex ethical realities surrounding boundaries and saying no

CASE TYPE: Ethical
Ethical cases involve value tradeoffs no matter the decision. They involve weighing competing values. For these, there is often no clear 'right' answer.

This case outlines the complex ethical tensions that are involved in boundary setting and negative responses. While this case focuses on the ethical dimension of these choices, this scenario also has practical considerations. For the practical perspective, please refer to the companion case: "Saying No With Compassion."

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Power Dynamics • Organizational Policies • Contextual Ethics	1. Learn to balance between empathy and boundaries in contextual settings. 2. Examine power dynamics, emotional safety, and burnout in immersive service roles. 3. Discuss strategies for ethical decision making in complex contexts and situations 4. Reflect on how to uphold organizational policies without dehumanizing individuals.

SCENARIO

Nevaeh is a sophomore studying computer science and philosophy. This year, she decided to join her university's community service partnership program, and is assigned to work each Saturday morning at a local drop-in center for the unhoused population. Nevaeh is surprised at how much she loves the work, and starts looking forward to it each Saturday. Her job is to field requests from the guests at the service counter. She receives information about their clothing, toiletry, food, and information needs. She also hands out basic supplies. Over time, she learns some guests are easy going and always go along with the established policies about what and how much they can receive each weekend. Others are more demanding, either using their familiarity with Nevaeh or an aggressive attitude to try to get more. Nevaeh is very conflict averse, and she starts to quietly acquiesce when these guests keep pushing. She knows this goes against the center's policies, but she feels bad denying requests to people in need.

During her next Saturday shift, a familiar guest comes up to the counter, one who has always been kind and followed the center's policies. However, this encounter is very different. The guest requests an extra bag of food. When Nevaeh says, "I'm sorry, but we can only give one to each guest," the formerly easygoing guest demands another. "I know you've been giving more to other people, it's not fair, why won't you treat me the same way!" she shouts. Throughout the day, this happens four more times.

At the end of the day, Nevaeh discusses this with the site supervisor, who adopts a grave expression. “I know it’s hard to say no,” she explains, “and it’s not just about fairness, although that is an important reason why we distribute these items equally. Last month a volunteer started making exceptions for people she liked. Word spread, and a fight broke out in the line because others felt cheated. It got very serious and we had to close the center for two days to wait for things to cool down. We’ve been doing this a long time, Nevaeh. These are not arbitrary rules, and even though we want to be fair, it’s not just about the amount of resources we have to give. These policies are how we keep this space safe for everyone.”

The following Saturday, Nevaeh is determined to stick to this plan. Her first guest of the day asks for an additional shirt from those available, and Nevaeh kindly but firmly reminds him of their policy. The man is not happy, but Nevaeh holds strong even though it is emotionally difficult. But she knows that she is being fair and keeping everyone safe. Then, a regular guest named Sarah approaches. Sarah is usually cheerful and strictly follows the rules, but today she looks exhausted and frantic. She leans in and whispers to Nevaeh that her youngest child has come down with a severe flu and they cannot leave their temporary shelter for the next few days to get to the soup kitchen. Her voice tight and strained, she asks, “Please, can I just have one extra bag of food? I don’t know how else I’m going to feed them until Monday.” Neveah is thrown off. She knows that Sarah never asks for help she doesn’t need, and isn’t the reason for this work to step in with help when people are desperate? Neveah looks around. There is a lull in the line and she realizes that she could easily slip Sarah an extra bag and no one would notice. She feels frozen, unsure of what to do next.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What ethical concepts are being considered in the center’s strict policies? What are their strengths and what are their potential pitfalls?
2. Do you think there is room for ethical discernment or disagreement on a case by case basis, like the one presented by Sarah?
    a. What would you have done in the final scenario if you were Nevaeh?
    b. Are there other actions or next steps that could be taken instead?
3. How does perceived special treatment impact dynamics in group settings?
4. What’s the difference between being fair and being equal in this context?
5. What are the ethical implications of weighing fairness, equality, and policy?
6. What are the risks of always saying yes? What are the risks of a strict no?
7. The principle of the Preferential Option for the Poor suggests that the needs of the most marginalized must be given priority, sometimes requiring radical exceptions to standard practice. However, as Nevaeh learned, inconsistent application of rules can jeopardize the balance of the entire community and the long-term viability of the organization. How might someone weigh the obligation to respond to an individual’s urgent, 'preferential' need against the obligation to maintain fair, safe, and sustainable institutional policies?
8. Is there a time when “living in the tension” between ethical ideas can be ok? Why or why not?
9. How can organizations support staff and volunteers in holding compassionate boundaries? What role do organizational policies play in this process? How might you go about discussing the ethics of policy within an organization?
10. When does saying no become an ethical necessity? When does saying yes become an ethical necessity?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- EXPLORE COMPLEXITY. Acknowledge that this is a complex and contextual situation. Many students may relate to the discomfort of saying no or to the fear of confrontation. There is likely not a perfect ethical solution possible here.
- INVITE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES. Challenge students to consider the various ethical dimensions: the student’s, the guests’, and the organization’s.
- DEVELOP PRACTICAL WISDOM. Emphasize that the ethical considerations might require out-of-the-box thinking and application of practical wisdom (i.e. in the final scenario, there might be a way to keep the boundary and provide more assistance for the woman).
- SET ETHICAL BOUNDARIES. Reinforce that holding boundaries is not inherently ethical or unethical, and can be one part in a larger framework of decision-making and service.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- How can you prepare yourself to live in and engage the ethical tension that might exist between policy and practice in your next community engagement?

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