Customer confidence—where a manager has privileged information regarding the activities of a customer and shares that information with another party.

Organizational resources—where a manager uses official stationery or a company e-mail account to communicate personal opinions or requests to community organizations.

In a survey of Harvard Business Review subscribers, many of the ethical dilemmas reported by managers involved conflicts with superiors, customers, and subordinates. The most frequent issues involved dishonesty in advertising and communications with top management, clients, and government agencies. Problems in dealing with special gifts, entertainment, and kickbacks were also reported. Significantly, the managers' bosses were singled out as sometimes pressuring their subordinates to engage in such unethical activities as supporting incorrect viewpoints, signing false documents, overlooking the boss's wrongdoings, and doing business with the boss's friends.

RATIONALIZATIONS FOR UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Why might otherwise reasonable people act unethically? Think back to the earlier examples and to those from your experiences. Consider the possibility of being asked to place a bid for a business contract using insider information, paying bribes to obtain foreign business, falsifying expense account bills, and so on. “Why,” you should be asking, “do people do things like this?” In fact, there are at least four common rationalizations that may be used to justify misconduct in these and other ethical dilemmas.

• Convincing yourself that the behavior is not really illegal.
• Convincing yourself that the behavior is really in everyone’s best interests.
• Convincing yourself that nobody will ever find out what you’ve done.
• Convincing yourself that the organization will “protect” you.

After doing something that might be considered unethical, a rationalizer says, “It’s not really illegal.” This expresses a mistaken belief that one’s behavior is acceptable, especially in ambiguous situations. When dealing with shady or borderline situations in which you are having a hard time precisely defining right from wrong, the advice is quite simple: When in doubt about a decision to be made or an action to be taken, don’t do it.

Another common statement by a rationalizer is: “It’s in everyone’s best interests.” This response involves the mistaken belief that because someone can be found to benefit from the behavior, the behavior is also in the individual’s or the organization’s best interests. Overcoming this rationalization depends in part on the ability to look beyond short-run results to address longer-term implications, and to look beyond results in general to the ways in which they are obtained. For example, in response to the question, “How far can I push matters to obtain this performance goal?” the recommended answer is often, “Don’t try to find out.”

Sometimes rationalizers tell themselves, “No one will ever know about it.” They mistakenly believe that a questionable behavior is really “safe”