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Dilemma

by Sina Romsa

Kira appreciates children and parents expressing their gratitude for the important role she plays in their lives. But she has always felt awkward and a little uncomfortable when families bring little “gifts” for her. She has mentioned her discomfort to various staff. “Don’t worry about it,” “It’s no big deal,” “It’s their way of saying thanks,” “Everybody does it...it’s fine!” are typical responses. Up to now, Kira has graciously accepted “gifts,” just like everyone else.

Early one morning, a parent, Morgan, and 4-year-old child, Tetjana, rush in. Tetjana is very excited, “Kira, Kira, I’ve got a special present for you! See! Here! Open it! Open it!” The gift is eagerly thrust into her hands. Kira suggests that a gift isn’t necessary but thanks them.

Morgan says, “Sorry but I’m running late. Got to run. We just thought we’d get you a little something ’cuz you’ll always do special things for us. Merry Christmas!”

Morgan and Tetjana hurry through their morning farewell ritual.

Kira opens the gift bag, finds a small box with a lovely set of 14K gold earrings inside. A staff member, looking on, is about to say something but closes her mouth, turns and quickly walks away.

What do you do? What is your first reaction? Here are some examples. Keep the gift because... Return the gift because... You’re not sure why Kira feels uncomfortable with “gift giving”... That family is truly grateful...You empathize with her sense of discomfort...You don’t understand the problem because you’d return anything over \$25/\$50/\$100... or she must be a particularly good ECE.

It’s important to get a pulse on your own initial reaction. This is the clue that helps you identify which values you hold most important at the outset. It also tells you which way you are leaning before you have had time to really think things through. Next, attempt to consider the situation from all other perspectives. Some questions may emerge for you. How may various children, parents and staff react to this situation? What kind of gift is too much and why? What are the motives and/or presumed expectations for gift giving and gift receiving? At what point is a gift “undue influence” in exchange for a special type or quality of service? Are there policies in place to guide staff? Am I missing something here?...what?

You aren’t “answering” these questions yet; merely opening to the possibilities they present as part of the process. If you have begun your ethical journey, then you know that the Code of Ethics is the “tool” that helps us with the process of identifying the “best choice” for action. At this point, refer to the your organizations Code of Ethics and explore each principle. Determine whether there is a value in each principle that is relevant or applicable to this circumstance. Identify what others may consider relevant, even if you may not. Do this for all the principles.

Next, list all the principles that may be in conflict. This helps you clarify all the potential conflicts at the core of the dilemma. For example, might there be a conflict between your partnership with parents (and/or between parents) and your partnership with colleagues? Is the principle of integrity in potential conflict with another principle? Which of the three principles specific to children is engaged in this dilemma?

Now, you are ready to consider some of the other major factors in ethical decision making:

- Stakeholders: who are all the people this may affect?
- Possible actions: what are all the things that could be done?
- Consequences: for each possible action, what might happen to each stakeholder?

Once you have all this information in place, it is time to begin thinking about a decision. You are guided by the intention to produce the least amount of avoidable harm. When you make the decision, the action you take declares which principle has primacy. This principle may very well be different than the principle attributed to your initial reaction. But, your “best choice” is your principle of primacy in action.

So what do you think about this dilemma? If you were Kira, what would you do? What is your best choice?

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