



# ETHICAL CONSISTENCY IN ADVANCEMENT

How To Stop Ethical Drift



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## Executive Summary

Advancement has ethical norms [across disciplines](#). There are still issues in consistency in how ethics are applied.

Most teams can articulate their values. Most organizations have policies. Most people involved are acting in good faith. And yet, the same types of decisions keep producing tension, workarounds, and outright moral failure.

In practice, advancement teams move between different ethical logic depending on the situation:

- Sometimes we default to **policy** (“we can’t do that”)
- Sometimes to **outcomes** (“this is too important not to do”)
- Sometimes to **relationships** (“this donor expects it”)

None of these is inherently wrong. The issue is that we switch between them, often within the same decision, without naming them or noting the switch. It’s inconsistent and it calls into question how we apply our values, because inconsistent application of values is commonly considered unethical. That’s what we call “ethical drift.”

We aren’t advocating tightening rules or asking people to be more principled. We are asking leaders and practitioners to introduce a simple constraint:

**Be explicit about the framework you’re using, and consistent in how you apply it.**

The tool we offer you here is designed to do exactly this. It gives teams a way to slow down just enough to make their reasoning visible, without turning every decision into a philosophical exercise.



## The Three Frameworks We Use

Most people don't see their ethical decisions as being part of a framework, but rather as discrete individual decisions. However, most ethical disagreements in advancement are about which framework is in play, rather than disagreements about values or any one decision.

We see the same three frameworks, over and over. All three are legitimate. We need all three.

But when we don't stay consistent once we've chosen one, that's a problem.

### Rules-Based: Policy, Consistency, Commitments

This is the "we don't do that" framework.

It shows up around:

- donor intent
- data access
- gift restrictions
- compliance

It's what advancement services often anchors to, because it creates consistency and protects the institution over time.

It also gets labeled as "rigid" the second it blocks something people want.

### Outcome-Based: Impact, Revenue, Mission

This is the "this will help the organization" framework.

It shows up when:

- a gift is significant
- timing matters
- the opportunity feels rare



This is usually where fundraisers are operating, and they're not wrong to be there. Advancement exists to move resources toward mission.

But this is also the framework most likely to justify bending rules just enough to make something work.

## Relational: Trust, Stewardship, Access

This is the "this relationship matters" framework.

It shows up in:

- donor expectations
- portfolio dynamics
- internal collaboration

It's often the least formal and the most persuasive: "We can't damage this relationship."

And sometimes that's true. Sometimes it's also a way to bypass harder constraints.

## What Ethical Drift Looks Like in Practice

Ethical drift is not dramatic. No one is flipping a table here. It's incremental, and usually defensible in the moment.

It sounds like:

- "We can't share that data" → "Just for this situation, we'll make an exception"
- "We have to honor donor intent" → "They would have wanted this"
- "We don't have capacity" → "We'll figure it out for that kind of money"
- "That's against policy" → "Policy wasn't written for this case"

Each step makes sense on its own. But taken together, they create a system where:

- policies are both rigid and optional
- expectations vary depending on who's asking
- trust between teams erodes



What's happening underneath is simple:

We start in one ethical framework, and when it becomes inconvenient, we shift to another, without acknowledging the shift. And we're told that when we don't go along to get along with these shifts, we're "not being flexible." Accusations of not being flexible are a red herring because the issue has nothing to do with anyone's flexibility. It's the inconsistency that wrecks our organizations and the people who serve them.

## The Ethical Framework Integrity Check

Why do we use a framework? To make sure we don't change the rules of reasoning halfway through a decision.

The Ethical Framework Integrity Check is designed to help you maintain consistent ethical decision making across different situations:

1. First, use the tool to determine which framework is the overall best fit for your organization: which framework fits our organization's mission, culture, and values the best?<sup>1</sup>
2. Then circle back to check your decisions: is our decision-making consistent and centered around our best-fit framework?

Who in your organization gets to determine the baseline ethical framework(s) will vary depending on your organization, but anyone can use this tool to "check their work" against those ethical baselines.

Leaders in particular should subsequently view all ethical decision-making through the lens of the organization's optimal ethical framework(s), even when you switch frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> Certain kinds of decisions may be best served by one framework while others by another framework. But as decision-makers, we need to define those situations transparently.



## Step 1: Define the Dilemma

What are we actually deciding on, and why do we need to decide it? What are we responding to that necessitates a decision?

- What are our options?
- Who are the stakeholders (and, if applicable, who is asking)?
- What changes based on our decisions?

If these answers aren't immediately clear, **stop**. Many "ethical gray areas" are just poorly defined requests. Define your dilemma first.

## Step 2: Choose the Framework

Before you start discussing your options, start with an ethical framework:

- **Rules-based** → We are following policy/commitments
- **Outcome-based** → We are prioritizing impact/results
- **Relational** → We are prioritizing trust/stewardship

Don't discuss or decide anything until a framework is chosen.

## Step 3: Propose a Solution

Apply the chosen ethical framework to the decision you face: within that framework, what do you believe to be the best decision and why?

"Within [X] framework, we recommend [Y] because [reason]."

e.g. *"Because we prioritize results over donors' feelings, we recommend contacting the donor to get permission to reclass the revenue from their endowment to a new area with much more need and potential for impact, even though it will make the donor unhappy."*

## Step 4: Consistency Check

Would you use your chosen framework to justify the same decision if the expected outcome were worse?

If the answer is no, you're not using a framework. You're working backwards from a preferred answer. Bring this insight and honesty back to Step 2 and try again.



## Step 5: Pressure Test

Run the decision against the other two frameworks:

- What rule(s) are we bending (if any)?
- What outcome(s) are we sacrificing (if any)?
- What relationship(s) is/are affected (if any)?

If you can't name a tradeoff, you're not being honest about the decision.

## Step 6: If You Switch Frameworks, Say So

This is the core of the tool.

If the conversation shifts, you have to name it, and you have to be willing to justify it:

"We started in [X], but we are choosing to prioritize [Y] because [reason]."

e.g. *"We are overriding our need to use money most effectively in favor of keeping this donor happy despite an ineffective endowment, because of the risk of litigation."*

That's allowed. What's not allowed is pretending you didn't switch.

## Step 7: Check for Repeatability

If this happened again, would we do the same thing?

- If yes → this is a pattern, and we can make similar decisions quickly and confidently
- If no → this is an exception, but we should define its limits so as not to misapply it

Both are fine. But they are not the same, and they shouldn't be treated the same.



## Step 8: Transparency Check

Can we:

- Write this down clearly?
- Explain it to another team without hedging?
- Revisit it later without rewriting the story?

If not, the issue isn't always the decision itself. But something isn't right, and we recommend you start by reexamining the reasoning behind the decision.

## Step 9: Document the Decision

- What did we decide?
- Which framework(s) did we use?
- Did we override anything?
- What tradeoff(s) did we accept?

This is what creates consistency and transparency over time.



## Conclusion

Advancement doesn't need a new or supplemental code of ethics. It needs a way to stop shifting its ethical logic depending on what's convenient in the moment.

As advancement professionals, we cannot abandon our responsibilities for judgment or nuance. We must make the reasoning behind decisions:

- visible
- consistent
- repeatable
- scalable

You can use this framework internally as-is. It's intentionally simple.

**For teams that want to operationalize this framework more deeply, Seagull Partners can facilitate workshops that:**

- apply the framework to real, current decisions
- surface where ethical drift is already happening
- build shared language across roles

You don't need us *per se*, but we're here to help if you want a partner. The long-term goal isn't dependence on a tool or a facilitator. It's your team making hard calls without changing the rules along the way, strengthening the sector as a whole.

Ready to elevate ethical consistency from aspirational to operational?

Let's talk.

Visit [seagullpartners.net](https://seagullpartners.net) or  
[connect with us on LinkedIn](#).



## References

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