Resolving Ethical Dilemmas of Human Resource Management In The Academe: A Decision-Making Process Model

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Abstract

The study explored on the ethical dilemmas of human resource managers and uncovered the process by which the managers resolve the dilemmas. This study used a grounded theory approach to formulate a basic social process model (theoretical model) of resolving those moral conflicts. All informants are human resource managers from private higher education institutions. The study followed the Glasserian grounded theory analysis to formulate a resolution process theory using the data gathered from the beginning. With the use of grounded theory analysis, it was found out that the six main processes used by the informants were (1) Consistency with policies; (2) Character check; (3) Considering consequences; (4) Communication; (5) Cultural sensitivity; and (6) Counteractive mechanism.

Keywords: Human resource management, ethical dilemmas, decision-making process, grounded theory, resolution

1.0 Introduction

Rationale of the Study

Ethical dilemmas are broadly defined as situations in which two or more values are in conflict. They concern four major business areas: human resources, customer confidence, conflicts of interest, and the use of corporate resources (Treviňo & Nelson, 2010). The most common among the four areas are those of the human resources. It is not an uncommon instance that we experience having perplexing questions in our minds on things that we believe are not right or done right. This phenomenon necessitates the HRD and the manager to make sound judgments in dealing with different subject matters.

Different HR managers employ a variety of ways to resolve ethical dilemmas in human resource management. Sometimes even, HR managers reach to a point when they have to set aside and compromise their own ethics just to get things done. Should it be that way? What should have been done? Studies by Wells and Schminke (2001) have found that HR managers can utilize an array of methodologies to resolve human resource conflicts and among them include discussing the problem and personal reflection. However, there might be a problem related to the applicability of these methodologies in every setting. So what process should be taken so HR managers from all settings can responsibly resolve ethical dilemmas?

Given all the questions raised in the previous paragraphs, the researcher attempted to discover the process of resolving ethical dilemmas; process that may be applied not just to one HR setting but in almost all, if not all, settings—academe, industry, healthcare, business, etc. This study embraced

different aspects of a resolution process that will guarantee a high degree of fit, workability, and modifiability so that it will be of good use to the HR managers and other research consumers.

Atheoretical Stance

Although it is very hard, if not impossible, to divorce oneself of knowledge bias, it was the researcher's intention not to identify a theory nor discuss a theoretical framework in this part. This was because of two reasons: (1) to suspend a priori assumptions or preconceptions so as to avoid inductive data contamination; and (2) to justify the emergence of a theory (or model) from the ground, not grounding data from theories, which is the essence of qualitative studies.

Domain of Inquiry

The objective of this paper is to generate a substantive decision-making process model based on the practices that HR managers employed to resolve ethical dilemmas.

Specifically, this study aims to address the following:

1. What ethical dilemma is commonly encountered in the office or institution?
2. How do HR managers in the academe resolve HR-related ethical dilemmas?
3. What decision-making process model can be generated based on the findings?

2.0 Methodology

In this study, the researcher used grounded theory to discover the process that human resource managers employed to deal with ethical dilemmas. The purpose of using a grounded theory method was to come up or generate a substantive,

if not a formal, theory (decision-making process model) that will help resolve ethical dilemmas. Although grounded theory follows the principle that "all is data", the researcher confined the study to informants whom he believes are essential enough in providing a rich source of information for analysis.

The researcher gathered data from eight human resource managers of different private higher education institutions in Cebu. Moreover, the major instrument in this qualitative study was the researcher with the aid of a semi-structured interview guide. The researcher as an instrument is valuable in making sure that there is flexibility in the research process. All informants were asked the same basic question on identifying the common ethical dilemma and the process to which they resolve the dilemmas.

Primary and follow-up questions were asked to obtain personal, original, and experience-based data. Audio-recording, transcription of interviews and field-noting were utilized during the interview. In trying to acquire as much data as possible, the researcher employed personal face-to-face interview with the informants. Prior to the interview, the participants were given an informed consent and the research protocol was then disclosed. All necessary information that the researcher needs to uncover to the participants were revealed.

The process in grounded theory encompassed an acknowledgment of the researchers' bias, the selection of a data collection site, the data collection process, the process of coding and analysis, and the compilation of results. Coding and analysis included three stages: open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. Open coding employed constant comparison and memoing

and results in themes, sub-categories, and core categories. These results guided the subsequent sampling of participants through theoretical sampling. The next stage of coding – selective coding – also employed constant comparison and memoing. This stage resulted in dense, saturated core categories. The core categories were then sorted, written, theorized, and cross-referenced with literature, during theoretical coding. The result of this last stage of coding was a basic social process or a theoretical model. This was the final product of this study.

3.0 Results and Discussion

From the informants, the researcher was able to gather common ethical dilemmas and different strategies of resolving the ethical dilemmas. The informants' responses were written using the process of memoing, audio-recording and transcription although Glaser (2004) does not require audio-recording interviews saying that field notes are more useful because they contain only relevant data.

Common Ethical Dilemmas

While human resource managers are expected to resolve organizational conflicts, they have not escaped from the reality of being personally able to experience the conflicts, which I call as the ethical dilemmas in this study. Presented in varying degrees and circumstances, the informants revealed the following categories of ethical dilemmas as most commonly encountered in the practice of their craft: (a) Recruitment and hiring dilemmas; (b) Evaluation dilemmas; and (c) Retention and retrenchment dilemmas.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas
Resolution strategy 1: Be culturally sensitive

Relating to being culturally sensitive, one informant stated, "To prevent ethical dilemmas, you have to be culture sensitive and find out how top and middle managers behave in the organization." Given this statement, it is just necessary to know how different people in the organization behave and why they behave in such manner. Corollary to that, another informant said, "Being familiar with diversity in the organization and considering individual difference also helped resolved my dilemmas."

Being culturally sensitive necessitates one to have self-awareness. Thus, one informant uttered, "In one of the dilemmas I have experienced, I introspected and discerned before I gave my decision. It pays to know one's self first before deciding." Moreover, it also takes one to be non-discriminatory for him/her to be culturally sensitive. Noting this, one informant said, "Moreover, I see to it that it terms of recruitment, I review candidates based on merits without regards on their physical appearance." And another informant added, "Know what you need, so that you don't have to step on someone else's shoes just to find the right person for the right job. Be just, regardless of imperfections." These are indications that human resource managers have to empathetic about thinking how others would feel about their decisions.

Cultural sensitivity is defined as "the knowledge and interpersonal skills that allow providers to understand, appreciate, and work with individuals from cultures other than their own. It involves an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, self awareness, knowledge of a patient's culture, and adaptation of skills" (Fleming & Towey, 2002). grade classification, and common characterization

of stocks in indexes. Similar qualities characterize other representative indices, for example, Reilly (1971) describes the Dow Jones Industrial Average

Figure 1. Axial coding for Cultural Sensitivity
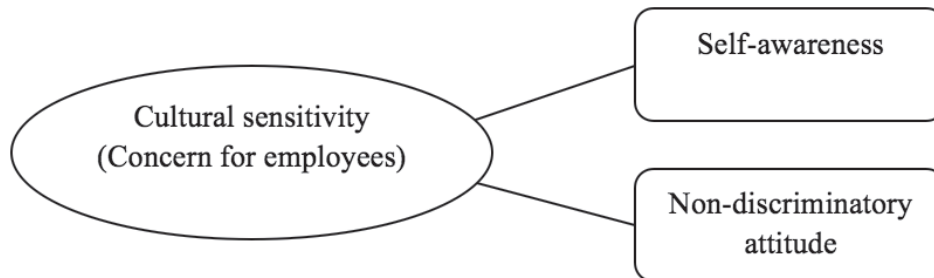
**Resolution strategy 2: Consider the consequences**

Another important resolution process to deal with ethical dilemmas is to consider the consequences of one's action. Human resource managers should ask: Will my action be beneficial to all? Considering the results of one's actions and decisions is very essential to ascertain that no one is compromised in the process. Human resource managers make decisions with an end-goal of producing a good or beneficial result. The consequentialist nature of some human resource managers allows them to be more objective and transparent.

Relating to the above paragraph, one informant said, "I pay attention to results. What's important for me is that the result of my actions is for the good of all." This statement only implies that a good decision is one that benefits the entire institution. Add to that, another informant also commented, "I can also resolve dilemma by ensuring that no one will suffer and everyone will benefit from my actions and decisions." Robinson (2003) emphasized that consequentialism is not unlike virtue ethics, in the sense that as a moral theory its goal is for everyone to act virtuously at all times.

In order to foster good outcomes from one's decision, it is also essential that human resource managers are more objective and transparent in their activities. On this note, one informant said, "It would also help that I am very clear about what to answer my applicants when they ask about the current situation of the organization." Making things clear evokes truthfulness in decision-making process and this is vital in upholding ethics in the organization and in human resource management. Relevant to that, another informant uttered, "As much as possible, I have to be transparent in dealing with people." Being transparent and objective allows the human resource managers to come up with timely, accurate and effective solutions to different problems.

Figure 2. Axial coding for Consequentialism
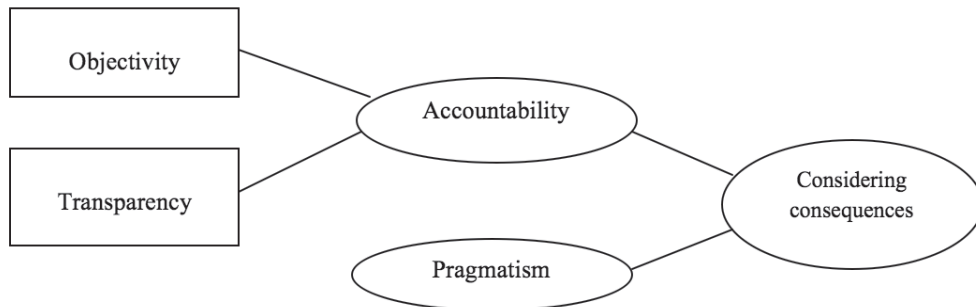

Resolution strategy 3: Communication

In resolving ethical dilemmas, human resource managers confessed that there is always something good about telling other people you problems and concerns. Given this, one informant said, "Open communication is the key to understand and be understood. This virtue should always be observed." Opening-up is a fundamental step to involving others in making decisions for complex situations such as ethical dilemmas. On this account, another informant mentioned, "When you cannot anymore decide on your own, consider the opinions of those whom you believe are better than you and relate your problem."

Two imperative aspect of communication in organizations are active listening and ignoring issues. With this, an informant commented, "I listen to both parties' side of the story. Through this, I will be able to weigh appropriately which request should be granted and which should be rejected." Upshot to that, it also pays off to be in a serene state of mind. Thus, ignoring pre-existing issues and annoying people also play an important role in effective communication. On view of this, an informant said, "When I'm really pissed off, I just ignore issues and act as if they don't exist." This is something of value since communicating should be not be coupled with misconceptions or negative feelings to foster good outcomes.

As a last say to this, human resource managers revealed that asking for expert opinions is also one way to help resolve ethical dilemmas. Sometimes, their instinctive responses are more helpful." Further, he said, I talk to the administration or to my staffs about the dilemma." No man is an island. HRM can champion a strong ethical culture in which employees feel free to openly speak about issues, question authority figures and report any concerns. Employees need to know how to handle the ethical dilemmas that they will encounter in their jobs (Becker, 2010).

Figure 3. Axial coding for Communication
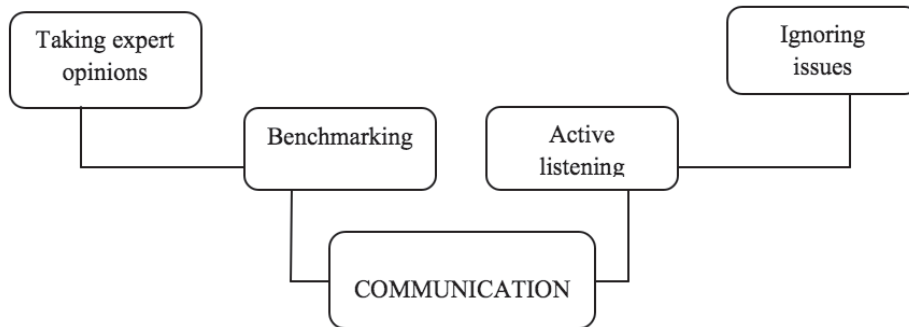
**Resolution strategy 4: Character-check**

Character is something innate of a person and perhaps, no character can be taught. With character as basis for resolving ethical dilemmas, one informant said during the interview, "I just have to be realistic about things. If I cannot do it, I would rather be honest than suffer the consequences. It's our character that matters anyway." This statement implies that whatever the action is, one's character is always a part of it. People use their character to come up with moral decisions and to this end, one informant said, "Our character guides us with every decision we make. Without character, we become less sensitive to others."

Being proactive, assertive and honest are relative terms that enable human resource managers to project what they believe is right and they indispensably use these three attitudes to assist them in resolving ethical dilemmas. In line with this, an informant commented, "Being proactive, not waiting for them to act first. Moreover, be assertive and when you are in the right track, just be firm with your decision as long as you are not violating rules." This indicates the need for human resource managers to defend and be firm with their moral decisions. To strengthen this, honesty should always be observed.

Values and character underpin all behavior. People act in accordance with their belief systems, which are organizing systems for individuals and organizations. These systems can be in harmony or disharmony (John Queripel Associates, 2014).

Figure 4. Axial coding for Character-check
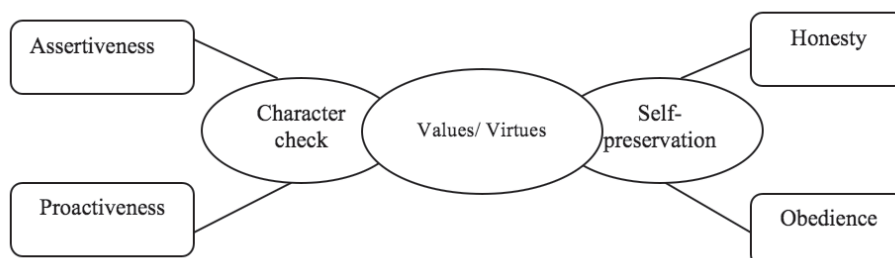
**Resolution strategy 5: Consistency with the policies**

For most of the informants, the most effective but most violated resolution process of resolving ethical dilemmas is by being consistent with the policies. The presence of a established set of policies for making human resource decisions is very vital to preventing and solving ethical issues. With this, one informant said, "Always go back to the written policies of the institution. This will lead you to the right path." Further he said, "Disciplinary actions should be written in the manual and should be implemented as stipulated." These lines only goes to show that the policies guide human resource managers in making moral decisions and it is through the policies that one is kept in track with what is fair, right, just, and unquestionable.

Relating to the use of policies in decision making, one informant also implied, "I review the institutional manual every now and then. I consider it as my bible every time I make decisions. And if I will be reprimanded of my decision, I will refer them to the policy of the institution. That would keep me protected against incrimination." The use of the policies can ascertain that the decision and actions of human resource managers are based on a set of philosophical ideas and this will prevent them from being implicated against unfair and unjust decisions. The policies will serve as their tool to effectively combat ethical problems.

Finally, in trying to stress on the use of policies in making decisions, one informant added, "The only way to resolve this dilemma is to scan the policies and inform the concerned individuals about how things should be done. Make everyone aware and be guided with the policies and guidelines of the institution. So they would know if they have violated them or not."

Figure 5. Axial coding for consistency with policies
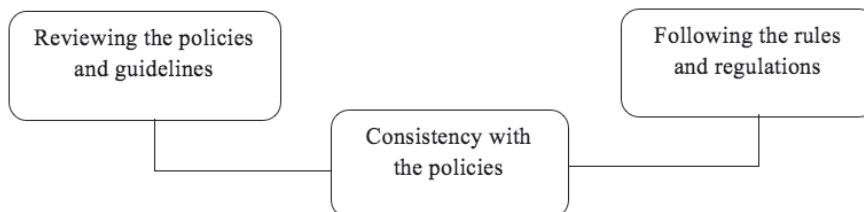
Selective or focused coding emerged after the core category was identified (Holton, 2010). Irrelevant codes were dropped and germane codes were retained. The following are the relevant codes identified:

Matrix 1. Selective and categorical coding for ethical dilemma resolution

| Category: Theoretical Constructs Level III	Sub Category: Constructs Level II	Basic Concept Level I
Cultural Sensitivity	Concern for employees	Self-awareness
		Non-discriminatory attitude
Consider consequences	Accountability	Objectivity
		Transparency
	Pragmatism	Being realistic
Communication	Benchmarking	Taking expert opinion
	Active listening	Ignoring issues
Character check	Virtues	Honesty
		Obedience
	Self-preservation	Proactive
		Assertive
Consistency with policies	Referring to the policies	Following the rules
		Reviewing the manual

This theoretical model for resolving ethical dilemmas was formulated utilizing the following: (a) 13 level I basic concepts, namely: self-awareness, non-discriminatory attitude, objectivity, transparency, being realistic, taking expert opinion, ignoring issues, honesty, obedience, proactive, assertive, following the rules and reviewing the manual; (b) 8 level II sub-category constructs, namely: concern for employees, accountability, pragmatism, benchmarking, active listening, virtues , self-preservation, and referring to policies; and (c) 5 level III theoretical constructs, namely: cultural sensitivity, consequentialism, communication, character check, and consistency with the policies.

Theoretical coding was then employed to entwine each part of the puzzle. In this study, I employed concept mapping (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009) to get rid of too much narrative explanation. This stratagem increased the power of abstraction and relational explanation of concepts in a schematic form.

4.0 Concept Mapping

*Figure 1. Concept map based on coding*
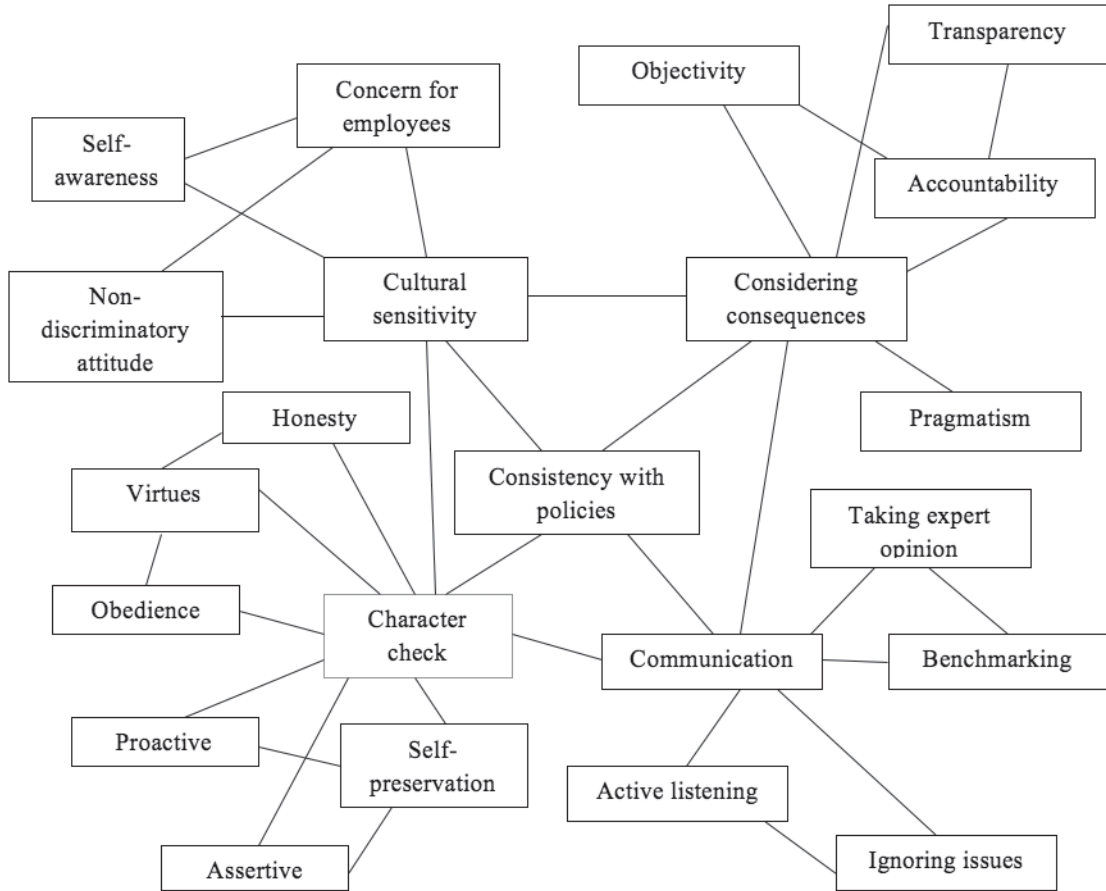
Basic social process

Based on the results of interview, memoing, coding, and concept mapping, I formulated this basic social process as part of my theoretical coding. This process was essential for me before I came up with my theoretical model. The process I have here was based mainly on the informants' responses.

*Figure 6. Decision-Making Process for Ethical Dilemmas (Serad, 2014)*
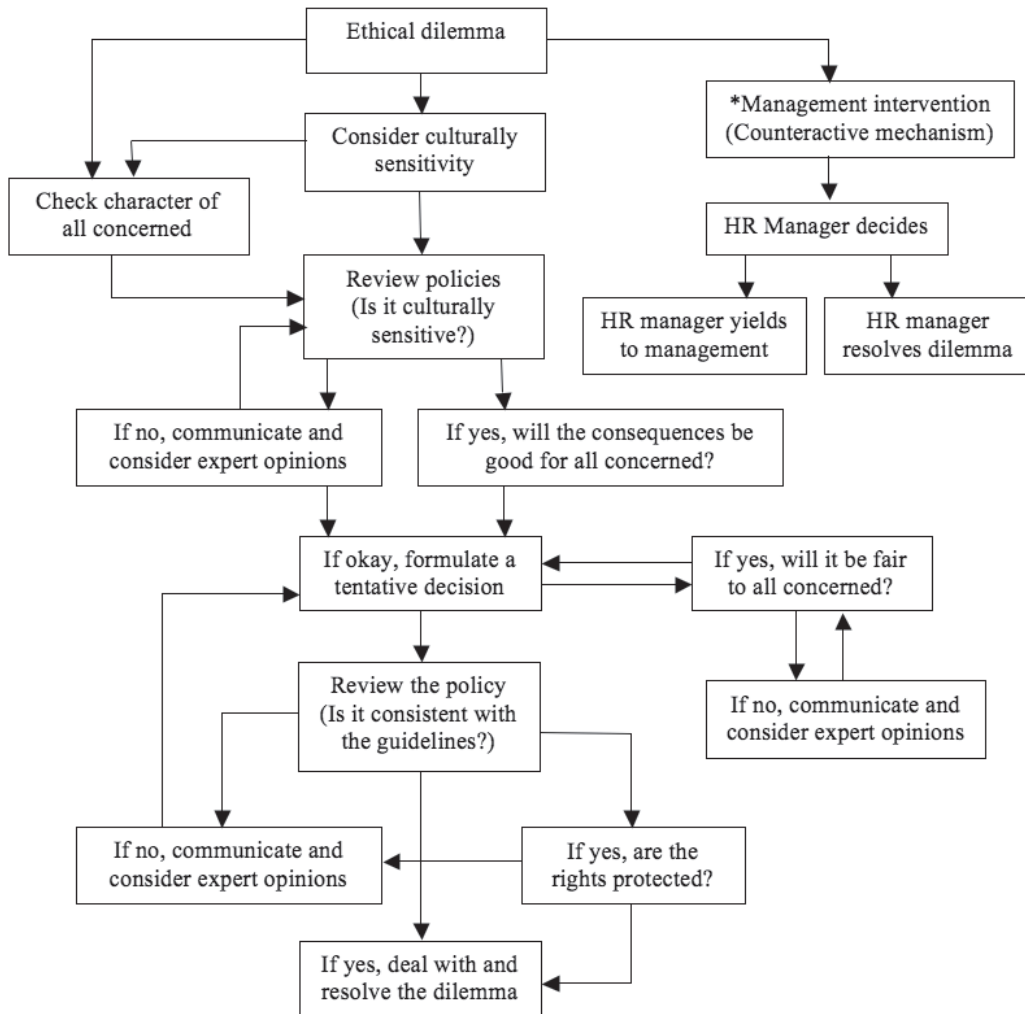
Theoretical Model

Especially in family-owned institutions, the presence of management intervention is inevitable in resolving ethical dilemmas. However, this does not technically resolve ethical dilemma and may even become precedence to another similar occurrence. In this case, the human resource managers either yields to management interventions and need not anymore resolve the ethical dilemma because the resolution process has already been intercepted by administrative decisions or counteract the management's decision and attempts to resolve the dilemma by acceptable means.

Based on the major findings revealed by the informants on resolving ethical dilemmas, I have come up with this 6C's resolution process which is supported by cultural sensitivity, consequentialism, character check, communication, consistency with policies and a counteractive mechanism.

Figure 7. Theoretical model on the 6C's Resolution Process for Ethical Dilemmas (Serad, 2014)
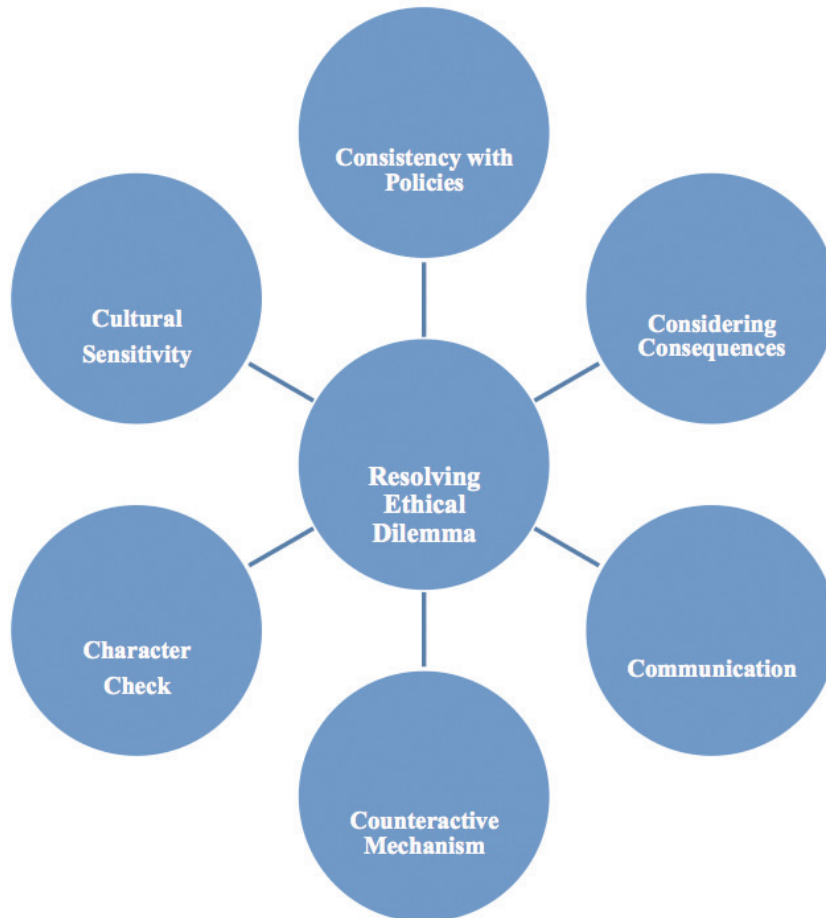
5.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings, I came up with the conclusion that the 6C's ethical dilemma resolution process which is supported by cultural sensitivity, considering consequences, character check, communication, consistency with policies, and a counteractive mechanism will be a better guide for human resource managers to resolve ethical dilemmas. Each of the six supporting elements of the resolution has been carefully identified and will be an effective means of dealing with moral conflicts.

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