Cooper's decision-making model

Cooper devised a method of moving from an ethical problem to appropriate alternatives and consequences. This model follows a sequential, rational approach to ethical decision-making. This method utilizes description and prescription, where public administrators begin to describe to themselves and others an objective state of affairs, and then begin to suggest steps to change the situation (1990, p. 17).[4]

The steps to this process are as follows:

1. **The Descriptive Task**: A problem is often presented in a fragmented, distorted fashion coupled with judgmental language and inflections (1990, p. 17).[4] Cooper contends that the administrator is in a position to have more complete knowledge when an issue is brought forward. Additionally, an administrator should attempt to describe questionable situations void of personal feelings (moving beyond the expressive level).

2. **Defining the Ethical Issue**: Often the most misinterpreted step, with defining the ethical issue, an administrator is not charged with defining the problem. Instead, there is an examination of what is the underlying ethical value that is being addressed. Often, there is a decision made because of a problem, without examination of the ethical issue. This is damaging to the process of decision-making because it harms one's ethical analysis skills and ethical identity. This is true because situations can differ, and practical decision-making may lead to inconsistencies without an ethical base (1990, p. 20).[4]

3. **Identifying Alternative Courses of Action**: Using a rationalistic approach, an administrator, with as complete knowledge of the situation as possible and an assessment of the ethical issue at hand, identifies all the plausible courses of action in response to the situation (1990, p. 21).[4]

4. **Projecting the Possible Consequences**: In this stage, all positive and negative results of each alternative are examined. When discovering the possible positive and negative outcomes of an action, administrators use their moral imagination, or the imagined enactment of how alternatives will play out. Ideally, as more consequences are enumerated, the ethical decision-making process will be strengthened (1990, p. 22).[4]

5. **Finding a Fit**: The appropriate solution or alternative is a balance of four elements (1990, pp. 22–25).[4]
   
   1. **Moral Rules**: Those basic standards that can be attributed to the alternatives and their consequences.
   
   2. **Rehearsal of Defenses**: The assessment and alignment of alternatives with the accepted norms of the wider professional organization and political communities of which we are a part.
   
   3. **Ethical Principles**: In assessing the moral rules, it may become clear that certain moral values are competitive. Therefore, it becomes difficult to say that an alternative which support social justice is more correct than the security of an individual or the organization. Here, an administrator assesses alternatives and their moral values under the light of the level of ethical analysis - deciding how the hierarchy of moral rules is structured and ultimately influencing the final decision.
   
   4. **Anticipatory Self-Appraisal**: Simply put, this analysis of alternatives requires an internal reflection of whether an administrator feels that an alternative fits within what he or she perceives to be their own personality. This is an examination of whether an alternative will meet our need to feel satisfied with the decision.

By following Cooper's model of ethical decision-making, a public administrator is able to create a more concrete process by which to assess individual steps that were taken in reaching a decision. This ensures that at each point, an effort was made by the administrator to uphold ethical principles and that fairness and equality were the standard. An administrator's decision must be able to withstand scrutiny to ensure that there is a continued trust and respect for accountability among employees and the public in the administrator's ability to conduct his/her duties.