UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Shelving hard decisions is the least ethical course.

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नैतिक मार्ग है ।

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SUBJECT

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MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Ethical responsibility requires timely decisions despite uncertainty; postponement can shift costs and risks onto vulnerable stakeholders; distinguish prudent deliberation from avoidance; examine leadership, administration, business, social justice and personal ethics; balance decisiveness with consultation, evidence and proportionality; argue that difficult decisions should be delayed only when additional information materially improves their quality, not to escape responsibility.

Model Answer

Introduction

Difficult decisions are uncomfortable because they often involve competing values, incomplete information and significant consequences. Yet leadership and ethical responsibility are tested precisely in such circumstances. To postpone a difficult decision merely because it is difficult is not neutrality; it is itself a choice whose consequences may be borne by others. Hence, shelving hard decisions can become the least ethical course when delay perpetuates harm, uncertainty or injustice.

At the same time, ethical decisiveness should not be confused with impulsiveness. The real ethical challenge is to distinguish responsible deliberation from convenient avoidance.

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The Ethics of Decision-Making

Every decision involves consequences. Even choosing not to act affects stakeholders.

Consider an administrator who discovers that a public project is unsafe. Delaying action because corrective measures may be politically unpopular could expose citizens to avoidable danger. Similarly, a manager who knows that an employee is violating safety norms cannot indefinitely postpone disciplinary action merely to avoid confrontation.

Thus, **inaction is often a form of action by default**.

Ethical decision-making requires:

Identify the problem → assess evidence → consult stakeholders → evaluate consequences → decide → accept accountability → review the outcome.

Why Shelving Difficult Decisions Can Be Unethical

1. It transfers the burden to others

A decision-maker may postpone a difficult choice, but the underlying problem does not necessarily disappear. Instead, its costs may accumulate and eventually fall upon citizens, employees, consumers or future generations.

For example, postponing action on environmental degradation may protect short-term economic interests while increasing ecological costs for future generations.

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2. It can allow preventable harm to continue

In healthcare, public safety and disaster management, delay can directly increase human suffering.

If a hospital administrator knows that a particular procedure is unsafe but postpones corrective action because changing it is expensive, the ethical cost of indecision may be borne by patients.

3. It weakens accountability

Ethical leadership requires taking ownership of difficult choices. Continually passing responsibility to committees, successors or future governments can create an accountability vacuum.

A public official who repeatedly says that a problem is “under consideration” without taking proportionate action may preserve personal comfort while failing public duty.

4. Delay can make the eventual decision harder

Problems frequently become more complex when neglected.

A small fiscal irregularity may become major financial fraud; an unresolved workplace conflict may become institutional dysfunction; an environmental problem may become irreversible ecological damage.

Therefore, **early difficult action can sometimes prevent later extreme action.**

Hard Decisions in Public Administration

Civil servants regularly face conflicts between competing public values.

A district administration may have to remove encroachments to protect public infrastructure, regulate illegal industrial activity to protect a river, or restrict activities during a public-health emergency.

Such decisions may generate opposition. Nevertheless, constitutional morality and public interest cannot be reduced to popularity.

The ethical administrator should therefore combine:

- legality with compassion,
- firmness with dialogue,
- public interest with stakeholder sensitivity,
- decisiveness with transparency.

For example, removing an illegal settlement may be legally necessary, but an ethical administration should simultaneously explore rehabilitation and livelihood protection rather than treating affected citizens merely as obstacles.

But Is Every Delay Unethical?

The statement requires an important qualification.

Not every postponement is avoidance.

Sometimes additional time is ethically necessary because:

- evidence is incomplete;
- the decision is irreversible;

- stakeholder consultation is essential;
- the consequences are potentially catastrophic;
- legal procedures require due process;
- a safer alternative may emerge through further analysis.

For instance, rushing a major infrastructure project without adequate environmental assessment may be more unethical than temporarily delaying it.

Therefore, the ethical question is not simply **“Did you delay?”** but **“Why did you delay, for how long, and what did you do during the delay?”**

Responsible Deliberation versus Ethical Avoidance

Responsible Deliberation	Ethical Avoidance
Seeks additional relevant evidence	Uses uncertainty as an excuse
Has a defined time frame	Has indefinite postponement
Consults affected stakeholders	Avoids difficult conversations
Reduces potential harm	Allows existing harm to continue
Leads to a decision	Transfers responsibility
Accepts accountability	Preserves personal convenience

This distinction is crucial for ethical governance.

The Role of Courage

Ethical leadership requires **moral courage**—the willingness to act according to principles despite personal or institutional costs.

Whistleblowers, reformers and honest administrators often face resistance precisely because difficult decisions challenge established interests.

However, courage must be accompanied by prudence. Acting merely to demonstrate toughness can itself produce injustice. Ethical courage therefore means **having the courage both to decide and, when necessary, to wait for adequate evidence.**

Individual and Social Dimensions

The principle applies beyond government.

In personal life, avoiding difficult conversations may preserve temporary harmony while allowing resentment to deepen. In organisations, ignoring unethical behaviour can create a culture in which misconduct becomes

normalised.

At the societal level, issues such as discrimination, poverty, climate change and institutional reform cannot be solved by repeatedly postponing uncomfortable choices.

Societies progress when they confront difficult questions rather than indefinitely passing them to future generations.

Intergenerational Ethics

The environmental crisis illustrates the ethical danger of postponement particularly well.

A generation may enjoy the economic benefits of resource-intensive development while leaving pollution, biodiversity loss and climate risks to those who come later.

Here, postponement effectively becomes **intergenerational injustice**.

The ethical principle of sustainable development therefore demands that present decision-makers consider not only current stakeholders but also those who cannot participate in today's decisions—the future generations.

The Ethical Middle Path

The ideal is neither impulsive decisiveness nor indefinite postponement.

An ethical decision-maker should:

First, define the problem clearly.

Second, distinguish reversible from irreversible decisions.

Third, collect the minimum evidence necessary for a sound decision.

Fourth, consult affected stakeholders without allowing consultation to become an excuse for paralysis.

Fifth, assess consequences, especially for vulnerable groups.

Sixth, decide within a reasonable time frame.

Seventh, communicate reasons transparently and accept accountability.

Finally, review the decision and correct course when evidence changes.

This approach combines **prudence with courage**.

Conclusion

Hard decisions are rarely comfortable because ethical choices often involve competing goods rather than a simple choice between right and wrong. Yet leadership cannot consist merely of keeping difficult questions permanently unresolved.

When delay protects the decision-maker rather than the public, shelving becomes avoidance; when delay protects people by improving evidence and preventing irreversible error, it can be ethically justified.

Therefore, the deepest ethical principle is not “always decide quickly,” but **“never postpone responsibility merely to escape discomfort.”** A mature ethical leader knows when to deliberate, when to decide, and when to accept accountability for the consequences.

Ultimately, **the ethics of a decision lie not only in what we choose, but also in whether we have the courage to confront the choice at all.**

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