



December 2006

Review of Mark D. Bennett and Joan McIver  
Gibson, *A Field Guide to Good Decisions: Values in  
Action*

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**Recommended Citation**

Ravitsky, V. (2006). Review of Mark D. Bennett and Joan McIver Gibson, *A Field Guide to Good Decisions: Values in Action*. Retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/bioethics\\_papers/16](http://repository.upenn.edu/bioethics_papers/16)

Postprint version. Published in *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, Volume 16, Issue 1, January 2007, pages 114-117.  
Publisher URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0963180107000126>

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Review of Mark D. Bennett and Joan McIver Gibson, *A Field Guide to Good Decisions: Values in Action*

**Abstract**

Decisions are something we all face. Decisions change our lives. As parents, as community members, as professionals, we find ourselves daily in complex situations that require good decision-making. Most decisions impact not only the decision maker, but also a network of others whose lives they affect. For healthcare providers and clinical bioethicists, decisions lie at the heart of daily practice and are particularly challenging as they touch the lives of individuals who are often vulnerable and in need of guidance and clarity.

**Comments**

Postprint version. Published in *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, Volume 16, Issue 1, January 2007, pages 114-117.

Publisher URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0963180107000126>

## **A Field Guide to Good Decisions: Values in Action**

Mark D. Bennett and Joan McIver Gibson

Praeger, March 2006

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Decisions are something we all face. Decisions change our lives. As parents, as community members, as professionals, we find ourselves daily in complex situations that require good decision making. Most decisions impact not only the decision-maker, but also a network of others whose lives they affect. For healthcare providers and clinical bioethicists, decisions lie at the heart of daily practice and are particularly challenging as they touch the lives of individuals who are often vulnerable and in need of guidance and clarity.

Decisions are often difficult because they come with a price tag. They involve difficult choices that cannot make everyone happy and rarely allow us to honor everything we value. Frequently, we find that the struggle between right and right is even more painful than the struggle between right and wrong, as it forces us to leave some important values behind or even violate others. In the healthcare arena, where the stakes are typically high, as in cases involving life and death or future quality of life, such difficult choices can be especially thorny.

A guide to good decisions that focuses on the values underlying the process of decision making, therefore has the potential to be an invaluable resource for healthcare professionals. “**A Field Guide to Good Decisions: Values in Action**” meets these expectations and goes beyond, offering readers a clear and structured process that they can employ not only as professionals, but also in other aspects of their lives. Reading it as a bioethicist, I hoped for some guidance in approaching clinical consultations and ethics committees’ discussions. I found myself engaged on every level and applying the process recommended in the book to re-evaluate the important decisions I recently made in my professional as well as my personal life. I believe I will not approach another future decision without considering at least some, if not all of the steps that are so clearly suggested in this valuable volume.

Written by a philosopher-bioethicist and a lawyer-mediator, this book is the outcome of over twenty years of the authors’ practical experiences, working with people who face tough decisions: watching their decision-making processes, helping them find ways to speak and listen to deeply held and often conflicting values, and working with them to create and communicate good decisions. This book takes the reader step by step through a simple, yet challenging process, clarifying the values that underlie decision making, providing guidance and tips that finally lead to a coherent and effective decision.

This process can be applied around patients’ beds as well as family kitchen tables or corporate boardrooms.

This is indeed a practical guide for decision makers who must tackle competing values and interests. However, it does not lack conceptual depth or philosophical insight. Clearly written, well structured and easily accessible, this guide is also a captivating read. Packed with stories taken from the authors' experiences with families, business leaders, professionals, neighborhood and community associations, it reads at times like a collection of narratives that engages the reader on an every day level, encouraging her to apply the process to her own experiences.

As the authors point out, whereas *what* we decide reveals what really matters to us, *how* we decide plays an essential role in whether or not our decisions will succeed or fail.

What then makes a good successful decision? Such a decision does not require that everyone be happy with the result, but it does require considering those who will have to implement it. A good decision, according to the authors, must be whole, coherent and transparent. It is whole when the process of decision making involves serious reflection on values and on what really matters to all stake holders. It is coherent when the reasons for it actually align with the decision itself, when beliefs and actions integrate. It is transparent when it is communicated to others openly and honestly, directly and candidly telling them why it was made and how it will impact them, even when the choices are tough and some may feel hurt. Such a decision builds integrity, accountability and trust. The book prescribes a process that ensures all these elements are in place.

While many books deal with practical ethics on a philosophical, abstract level, very few cross over into the domain of action and offer practical assistance. This book bravely fills

this gap by telling readers how to walk their talk and by dealing with the behavioral aspects of decision making. It focuses on transferable skills and shows how ‘value talk’ can be productive and effective. Each chapter features a ‘what you can do’ section, and the appendix contains exercises and worksheets that have been developed, refined, and used by the authors over the years.

At the heart of this field guide, lies a five step process that smoothes the road to a good decision. These steps require you to clarify, comprehend, commit, choose and communicate. The chapters in the first part of the book are organized around these catchy terms. The first step is to clarify perspectives by understanding the elements that shape or frame them, such as our roles (the ‘hats’ we wear), our life experiences, and our training. Being aware of how our perspectives are shaped is the first step in appreciating what we bring to the table and maintaining focus as we begin to consider a sometimes overwhelming amount of relevant information.

The second step is to comprehend what matters by better understanding the full range of values at work. This can be achieved by acknowledging the context of the specific decision at hand (its place, time, the unique histories of its stake holders), naming the relevant values and deepening the conversation by ‘peeling the onion’, or exposing the personal beliefs and interests that values are shorthand for. To fully comprehend what matters we must elicit from others what matters to them and make sure we understand each other by avoiding jargon, abstract terms and unchecked assumptions.

The third step is to determine what matters most and to commit to it. After gathering and understanding the multiplicity of relevant values, we must test our allegiance to them and determine which ones carry enough weight to orient our decision. This is the most challenging step on the road to a good decision because here some values must be left behind and the prices emerge. As the decision making clock ticks, it is important to pause and consciously commit to a few guiding values. At this point the authors offer many practical strategies for managing the process, whether one is making the decision alone or as a part of a large organization.

One may wonder whether this process is grounded in moral relativism and whether the book is based on the assumption that *any* set of values can underlie a good decision, as long as one commits to it after reflection. This is not the message of this book. The authors' encouragement to expand our perspectives, challenge our assumptions and re-assess our values does not lead to moral relativism. Rather, it is based on the compelling idea that taking a stand against what is wrong is just the beginning of the decision making process. We are confronted with the more difficult moral challenge when we embark on the journey of considering the complexity of legitimate, competing goods and their price tags. This book is grounded in the belief that when moving towards the good, we find ourselves on a more productive terrain of moral discourse, than when we are focused on tackling wrongdoing.

The fourth step is choosing to act based on our top values. The authors describe this step as coming to a crossroad: the stage of reviewing and analyzing is behind us, and action

lies ahead. We are now expected to walk our talk. At this point it is important to acknowledge the often regrettable or painful consequences of our decision, along with the expected benefits. Those who will not benefit from the decision are likely to point to its weaknesses. Anticipating the downside is therefore crucial for an effective decision that actually works and engages everyone.

The fifth and last step is to communicate the decision transparently to those who have a stake in it, thus becoming accountable and responsible for it. Those who deserve to know should receive a direct and honest account of the decision making process and its product. We live in a climate where secrets flourish, argue the authors. From national security to family harmony, we find many excuses for not being truthful or accountable for our actions. Although often difficult, communicating decisions transparently is therefore also an important means of building character and integrity.

The second part of the book focuses on obstacles along the road to a good decision, such as mental and emotional detours and the need to bridge cultural divides or navigate in organizations. I found the discussion on culture of particular interest, since the authors adopt an unusually broad and sensitive definition that allows them to embrace the various challenges raised by cultural differences. They challenge the common approach that limits culture to ethnicity or heritage, acknowledging that cultural identity is also formed by “families, professions, faith communities, work environments and political affiliations”. They also challenge the notion of ‘rationing culture’, which assigns one cultural identity to each person. Each one of us, they emphasize, wears many cultural hats

and is a unique multicultural phenomenon. Unraveling our own cultural complexity is thus essential to the process of reaching a good decision. Here again, the book does not fail to offer insightful guidance. Considering the truly diverse nature of North American society, the cultural richness of each individual, and the many ways in which cultural differences can generate conflict, this guidance is of particular importance.

Overall, both as a practical guide and as a theoretically challenging work, this book provides helpful guidance and conceptual clarity that make it a useful tool and an invaluable resource to anyone confronting difficult decisions.