

Great Lakes Energy: Ethical Choices for Powering the AI Race¹

Teaching Notes: Learning Objectives

- Develop an appreciation for the benefits and challenges posed by AI data centers. This case is an introduction to the issues associated with the development and operations of data centers, an enterprise that is growing significantly.
- Apply ethical reasoning to workplace values conflicts by systematically evaluating stakeholder impacts, obligations, and relevant principles in business decision-making.
- Recognize the role of environmental and social considerations in managing key business risks and identifying new opportunities.

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Case Synopsis

Sarah Miles, the Director of Strategic Planning at Great Lakes Energy (GLE), a fictional Midwest electric utility, is tasked with creating a strategy pitch that goes against her moral beliefs. Her newly hired boss, CFO Betsy Johnson, has asked her to prepare a Board presentation to recommend a new growth strategy to improve the company's lagging stock price.

Sarah is faced with two moral dilemmas. Her obvious conflict with the strategy is that it delays a public commitment to close coal-fired power plants in order to accommodate a new AI data center. She is a seasoned executive who is proud of GLE's climate leadership. Complying with Betsy's request would require Sarah to go against her adherence to environmental sustainability. The second dilemma involves the specific data center site under consideration. Sarah's analysis suggests it would favor a powerful AI hyperscaler and have serious negative consequences for a small rural town's vulnerable residents. This offends Sarah's core sense of fairness and integrity. But not supporting her boss could derail Sarah's career with significant consequences for her family.

Workplace values conflicts often occur when an employee finds that what's good for the company is at odds with their core beliefs. Sarah's new boss has a financial incentive to pursue this strategy due to a significant grant of Restricted Stock Units. But Betsy is not a renegade CFO, simply pursuing personal financial gain. She is doing exactly what the Board hired her to do. So, the bigger question is whether Sarah is no longer a "fit" for GLE? Sarah must weigh her obligations to her company, her beliefs, her career and her family. The student must decide what Sarah should do and most importantly, why?



Supplemental Case Information

Conflicting Legislative Priorities – The Michigan Example

The legislature of the U.S. state of Michigan has created a regulatory framework and a set of priorities that directly impact the utilities it regulates. Some of these goals conflict with one another, but an inherent priority order has been established. The core mission of the MPSC is safety, reliability and affordability of energy. It was established when the commission was created.

Subsequently, other objectives have been added by the state legislature. Significant renewable energy mandates were created in 2023. Lawmakers made distinctions between renewable and clean energy when they established goals for 2030 and 2040 as shown in the chart below. Its clear plan was to phase out coal-fired generation. But the legislation notably created an offramp, so that if reliability was threatened, the goals could be delayed or more fossil fuel generation capacity could be added. In so doing, it confirmed the primacy of the reliability mission.

Michigan Renewables Mandate		
Fuel	2030 Renewables	2040 Clean Energy
Coal	-	-
Natural Gas	-	carbon capture
Hydro	select	x
Nuclear	-	x
Wind	x	x
Solar	x	x
Other	-	Battery

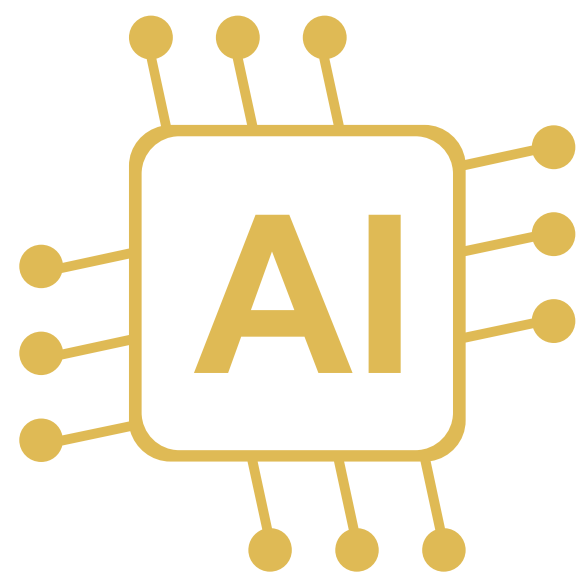
Then in 2024, the same legislature renewed economic growth incentives for data centers (exemption from 6% sales and use tax) despite concerns from environmental interests that it would result in utilities taking the renewable goal offramp. Although renewable goals were deemed critical, the economic development benefits of data centers were apparently considered slightly more important.

The Federal government has shifted policy priorities away from environmental concerns and toward reliability. In 2025 an executive order was issued to keep a coal-fired generation plant in Michigan open, described as a strategy to avoid potential summer brown-outs.¹ Utility executives must navigate these changing and sometimes conflicting priorities.

Decline of Reserve Margin and Intermittent Power

The growth of electricity demand from data centers has outpaced the ability of utilities to add new power generation capacity. Reliability is threatened as the reserve margin for electricity (capacity minus demand) has declined. At the same time, climate initiatives have closed a significant portion of coal-fired generation. The replacement of coal-fired generation capacity with intermittent sources of power (wind and solar) further exacerbates the problem during periods of peak demand. If the wind slows on a very hot summer day when demand for air conditioning is high, there can be shortfalls. Technology for industrial scale battery storage is not yet cost efficient to fill the gap and non-renewable sources must do so.

Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) which covers 15 states, reflects these trends. MISO's available excess reserve margin has declined from 6.5 GW in 2023 to 2.6 GW in 2025. This is the power it can make available to member utilities whose demand outstrips its capacity. Until reserve margins can be improved with new generation capacity, the primary tool available to utilities to close the gap is demand management. They pay customers to voluntarily reduce power when reliability is threatened. Unfortunately, data centers do not have the flexibility to reduce power like some commercial establishments.



Because the topic of data center development is current, complex and evolving, instructors can also encourage students to research current real-world examples of the challenges, changing regulatory considerations, and other contextual factors.

Questions for Discussion

Q1: What are the most important advantages and disadvantages associated with AI data centers?

Q2: Who are the important stakeholders and what are their specific interests?

Q3: What should Sarah do and why?

Q1

What are the most important advantages and disadvantages associated with AI data centers?

Potential Student Comments – “Data centers only benefit technology companies.” Students may assume that economic gains flow exclusively to large technology firms such as cloud and AI providers. While these companies capture significant profits, data centers may also generate indirect benefits, including tax revenues for local governments, short-term construction employment, and infrastructure investments in power systems. Importantly, the major benefit of AI data centers is AI itself, a revolutionary technology that is increasingly used by people and organizations around the world to help with efficiencies and innovations.

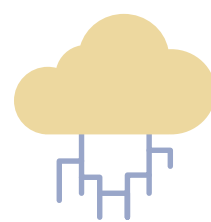
A classroom exercise to consider the “pros” and “cons” of AI data centers is a good way to start discussion. Consider creating a blank “T” diagram like the one below and fill in ideas and student responses. The result will be a more balanced sense of AI data center costs and benefits. Several examples are provided and instructors can encourage students to identify these or others. Learners may wish to consider specific considerations from their particular disciplinary lens.

AI Data Centers	
Pros	Cons
Transformative benefits of AI	Risks of AI - jobs, safety
Economic growth from investment	Higher utility rates
Construction employment	Environmental risks - water
Local economic development	Reduced grid stability & reliability
Potential for increased tax revenue	Potential for negative impact on rural communities

Q2

Who are the important stakeholders and what are their specific interests?

Potential Student Comments - “GLE should always prioritize environmental goals over profits.” OR “GLE should always prioritize financial gain over sustainability concerns.” Students may initially frame the case as a simple moral choice between sustainability and financial performance. Instructors can encourage deeper discussion by highlighting shareholder expectations, government rules on pricing and infrastructure, prior environmental commitments, and the need to ensure the electricity grid can consistently meet demand without outages or shortages. These regulatory and operational limits constrain how quickly and easily GLE can pursue purely environmental or profit-driven strategies.



Principled reasoning can help business decision makers navigate complex dilemmas, allowing for more thoughtful analysis and leading to better decisions and actions. This approach can help with prioritization of goals and can equip us to more persuasively lead others. There are several ethical frameworks that might help Sarah. The class discussion can explore these frameworks to understand the complexities involved in Sarah’s dilemma.

Multi-Level Ethical Analysis (micro-meso-macro)

This framing encourages students to examine ethical issues at three levels, highlighting how ethical dilemmas are shaped by both personal choices and organizational systems. Insights from the class discussion will generate understanding at all three levels. If these have not been covered in previous classes, a reading may be assigned in advance.

Suggested Readings, grouped by theme, are provided at the conclusion of this Teaching Note.

- Individual (micro-level) considerations: Sarah’s personal values, integrity, and professional judgment. Students should be challenged to determine why they hold their own values.
- Organizational (meso-level) considerations: GLE’s leadership, culture, incentive structures, sustainability commitments, purpose, and decision-making processes.
- Societal (macro-level) considerations: The broader impact on communities, environments, and public trust.

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It may be useful to create a matrix to capture class insights on the levels of analysis as the discussion proceeds:

Multi-Level Ethical Analysis		
		Insights on how Sarah's Ethical Dilemma is shaped
Micro - Personal Choices		
	Personal Values, Integrity, Professional Judgment	
Meso - Organizational System		
	Leadership, Culture, Incentive Structure, Sustainability, Purpose, Decision Process	
Societal Impact		
	Community, Environment, Public Trust	

Stakeholder Analysis

This case involves multiple stakeholders with varying and often competing goals. Issues such as power and information asymmetry, differences in short- and long-term priorities, and other considerations are important to acknowledge. The completed matrix below provides examples of possible issues. Consider providing a version of the matrix with only the first column of stakeholders filled in. Use the class discussion to identify other stakeholders, and to complete the relative power, time frame and goal columns. Students should be encouraged to consider a wide range of interested parties, and the nuances of each. For example, they might consider whether there are any differences in the concerns of an often-unionized utility workforce, and non-unionized management teams – both groups are employees of the utility. The analysis should generate some interesting debates and insights. What are the stakeholder interests and priorities? Whose interests are most salient? Whose interests need to be protected?

Stakeholder Matrix

Stakeholders	Stakeholder Perspective		Goals	
	Power in this Situation	Time Frame	Primary	Secondary
Hyperscalers	High	Medium	Win AI Race, Profits	Build data centers
Developers/ Intermediaries	High	Short	Build data centers, profits	
State/ Federal Regulators	High	Long	Reliability, affordability	Create jobs, clean environment
Utility Executives	Medium	Medium	Reliability, stock price	Clean environment, Brand, affordability
Utility Shareholders	Medium	Medium	Stock performance	Reliability, Brand
Environmental Organizations	Low	Long	Clean environment	
Local Community	Low	Long	Jobs, reliability, affordability	Clean environment (long-run)
Utility Employees	Low	Long	Job security	Clean environment

Managing Risks and Identifying Opportunities

To this point, the case discussion may have centered primarily on a values conflict and stakeholder fairness. However, instructors may wish to broaden the analysis. In most companies – particularly in capital-intensive, high-profile industries such as utilities – environmental and community impacts can translate into financially material risks. Framing the discussion in this way encourages students to move beyond a binary view of “ethics versus profit” and instead consider how long-term value creation may depend on managing these risks effectively.

Industry researchⁱⁱ suggests that companies operating in capital-intensive sectors such as utilities face five primary categories of risk when environmental and stakeholder impacts are not carefully managed:

1. *Physical Risk: Strain on infrastructure and system reliability. In the GLE case, declining MISO reserve margins and the limited flexibility of AI data centers increase pressure on grid reliability.*
2. *Price Risk: Exposure to fuel cost volatility and shifts in market pricing. Residential electricity prices have already risen 6.5%, and greater reliance on coal generation or wholesale purchases may introduce further cost pressure.*
3. *Regulatory Risk: Uncertainty in cost recovery, permitting, and compliance approvals. Michigan’s renewable mandate includes an off-ramp prioritizing reliability and delaying coal closures may invite heightened scrutiny from the MPSC.*
4. *Reputational Risk: Loss of public trust or stakeholder support. Backtracking on sustainability commitments or increasing burdens on rural communities through rate impacts or water usage may affect public perception and political support.*
5. *Liability Risk: Legal or contractual exposure arising from environmental or rate-related disputes. The Ohio precedent requiring data centers to pay for 85% of contracted usage illustrates how cost allocation conflicts can escalate into disputes.*

In the GLE case, each of these risk categories can be identified using facts embedded in the narrative, allowing instructors to connect ethical analysis with strategic risk management. While this framework highlights the financial implications, it does not resolve the moral dimensions of Sarah’s dilemma. Ethical analysis remains essential.

Relevant Ethical Obligations and Responsibilities

A common comment may be that Sarah is behaving ethically while Betsy is motivated by money (her RSUs). But is it that simple? It is always helpful to have a clear understanding of why each of us holds certain ethical beliefs. It might be useful to start by asking how each of these ethical perspectives might be relevant for Sarah's decision. For optional pre-reads for courses that have not incorporated discussion of ethical frameworks, see Suggested Readings, or instructors may wish to present an **Ethical Decision Model**. One model is provided later in this note.

Utilitarian Ethics (consequentialism): Utilitarianism focuses on maximizing overall social welfare. Students may weigh economic and technological benefits of data center expansion against environmental harm, higher consumer costs, and long-term risks.

Duty-Based Ethics (deontological ethics): This framework emphasizes moral obligations and commitments. GLE's public commitment to close coal plants raises questions about whether financial pressure justifies breaking prior commitments of purpose.

Virtue Ethics: This framework focuses on personal character, integrity, and long-term ethical development. Students are encouraged to consider whether their actions align to the type of leader they aspire to be. Ethical proactivity emphasizes building habits and organizational cultures that support ethical behavior, helping leaders make principled choices even when under pressure.



It may be helpful to create a matrix to capture student comments. Begin with a discussion of which ethical frameworks appear to drive Sarah's decision and why. Then add a column and ask what ethical system(s) seem to drive Betsy's behavior. When studying motivations for decision making, the comparisons can be interesting and often lead to identification of new possible solutions.

	Ethical Beliefs	
	Sarah	Betsy
Utilitarian		
Duty-based		
Virtue Ethics		

Legal and Regulatory Guidance

Laws and regulations provide a necessary context. A useful classroom discussion exercise is to create a list of the primary legal and regulatory guidance available to GLE. Consider creating a blank matrix like the one below and fill it in as you proceed. Some data for Michigan, as an example, are embedded in the case but some students may do independent research. Ask students to identify the stated regulatory goals and whether the state legislature has prioritized them in practice. Explore whether students agree with those priorities. As you proceed, make notes about how these priorities may conflict with each other. Why would a state government enact laws with conflicting goals? Students will discover that even when dealing with basic legal and regulatory guidance, things are not as clear as they might expect.



Objective	State Priority	Student Priority	Conflicts
Safety, Reliability, Affordability	1		Faster growth reduces reserve margin
Economic Growth - tax incentives	2		Faster growth may delay renewable goals Faster growth threatens reliability by reducing reserve margin
Sustainability - Renewables Mandate	3		Intermittent sources threaten reliability - not always available for peak usage

Q3

What should Sarah do and why?

Potential student comment: “Sarah should resign immediately.” Some students may view resignation as the only ethical choice. Instructors can prompt discussion about the effectiveness of internal advocacy versus exit. Sarah is unlikely to change her core beliefs. The essence of her dilemma is whether her job is still a good fit for her. She has several options in this situation, including:

1. **Comply:** Recommend what Betsy has asked her to recommend – trust that the Board, Regulators, and other involved parties will make the appropriate corrections. Continue to advocate for change within the organization.
2. **Attempt to persuade:** Draft the presentation in a professional, unbiased manner, but highlight risks and opportunities. Hope that Betsy will agree. If not, perhaps recommend hiring a consultant.
3. **Reach out to a CEO or other leader:** Raise the situation with a mentor, which could be a reasonable approach. But Betsy could view this as “going over her head” which could lead to new problems.
4. **Offer Resignation:** Stepping down would not compromise Sarah’s principles but it will have severe consequences. What would be helpful to know about Sarah’s personal situation before taking this course of action?
5. **Other options?**



Consider asking students for a list of Sarah’s realistic options. Then solicit benefits and consequences associated with each option. At the end of the class, you might want to ask for a show of hands for each option. Then ask for a show of hands for how many changed their choice based on the class discussion.

Ethical Decision Model

The ethical frameworks provided earlier in this note can help students make informed ethical decisions. For a more in-depth analysis of ethical obligations, it might be worthwhile to hand out a copy of an Ethical Decision Model. Models such as the one provided here are helpful tools for principled analysis of questions and decisions. An overview of the model is below, and more information is available [here](#).ⁱⁱⁱ

Step 1 – Who has a stake in this decision? What’s at stake for each of them?

Step 2 – Which ethical obligations and responsibilities are relevant? Here we may consider a discussion of moral obligations and universal values, and may also consider the principles associated with human rights.

Step 3 – How might these obligations conflict with one another?

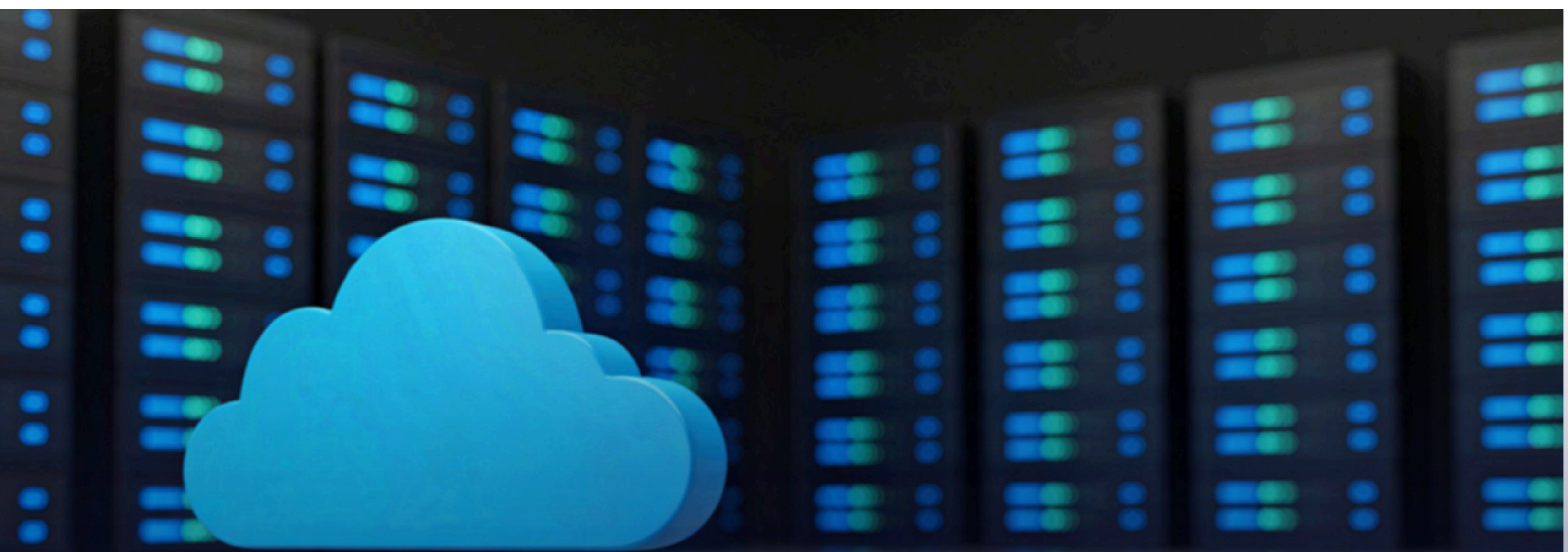
Step 4 – What guidance is available? Are there resources (codes of conduct, legal requirements, trusted allies, institutional or personal support) that we can consider when formulating our decision?

Step 5 – What are our options? What are the alternative resolutions we can identify for this decision?

Step 6 – How would we articulate or explain this decision to stakeholders?

Step 7 – A final check – can this decision be considered universalizable? Can it be used as a guiding precedent for future decisions?

Step 8 – What should be done?



Further Questions for Discussion

Additional questions may be incorporated as the instructor finds useful:

- Do you think that granting executives performance stock units (incentives to increase the stock price) can lead them to make unethical decisions? How do you balance the drive to increase stock price while also staying true to the company's goal and mission? Do you think Betsy would be less inclined to break the ethical commitments just to increase stock price if she wouldn't personally benefit?
- Sarah told Mary Thomas, "we're professionals and need to set aside our personal opinions to analyze the risks and opportunities of this strategy." Do you think this is wise advice? How should you prioritize your personal and professional obligations? How would you manage advancing in your company while still doing what you think is right?
- Some ethical dilemmas, such as being asked to falsify information, mistreat employees, or commit inhumane acts seem like compelling reasons to quit. However, environmental issues such as delaying climate commitments seem less clear. Do you think Mary should resign if GLE goes forward with cancelling their renewable commitments? Why or why not? What makes breaking environmental promises different from other dishonest business practices?
- Do you think it is better to quit a job with a boss you disagree with ethically, or stay with the company and seek to change it from within? If you stay, how do you know when the company has crossed a line and it is time to leave?
- What did you say Sarah should do? How would your answer change if Sarah knew that keeping the coal power plants on for four more years would keep their customer's prices __% lower? What if staying committed to renewable energy would raise the prices for consumers by __%?
- Do you think the construction of a new data center in rural Michigan is a good idea? Are the potential societal benefits of AI worth the environmental drawbacks such as depletion of natural water sources and high electricity usage?
- Building a new data center is almost certainly going to increase the electricity bill for all consumers in the area. Do you have any ideas on how GLE could manage this cost for area consumers? Do you think it is fair for GLE and other utility companies to require data centers to pay for 85% of the power they are supposed to use even if they do not end up using it? Why or why not?
- John Williams made a comment about the potential of hiring a consultant in order to take the heat off Betsy in case things didn't pan out. What are your thoughts on companies hiring consultants to solve their most vexing challenges?

Suggested Reading and Additional Resources

Data Center Financing

- Angell, Melissa, “CoreWeave Doubled Revenue, but It’s Lowering Its Outlook for the Year. Here’s Why,” *Inc.*, 11/10/25, <https://www.inc.com/melissa-angell/coreweave-doubled-revenue-but-heres-why-its-lowering-its-outlook-for-the-year/91262224>
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- Gearino, Dan, “Consumers (and a Utility) Get a Win in Ohio, While Data Centers Take the Loss,” *Inside Climate News*, 7/17/25, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/17072025/inside-clean-energy-ohio-data-centers-penalties/>
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- Kury, Theodore, “Data centers need electricity fast, but utilities need years to build power plants – who should pay?” *The Conversation*, 12/12/25, <https://theconversation.com/data-centers-need-electricity-fast-but-utilities-need-years-to-build-power-plants-who-should-pay-271048>
- Petroni, Giulia, “AI Boom to Fuel Surge in Data Center Energy Needs, IEA Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 4/10/25, <https://www.wsj.com/business/energy-oil/ai-boom-to-fuel-surge-in-data-center-energy-needs-iea-99f90810>

Selected Community Responses

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NOTES

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ii Adapted from work by McKinsey & Company, *Climate Risk & Response*, Woetzel et al 2020.

iii McManus Warnell, Jessica. (2015). “Ethical Decision Model,” excerpted from *Engaging Millennials for Ethical Leadership: What Works for Young Professionals and Their Managers*, New York, NY: Business Expert Press, 2015.