



### Ways of Thinking about Our Values in the Workplace

This note begins with the assumption that most of us want to find ways to voice and act on our values in the workplace, and to do so effectively. We focus here on situations where we believe that we know what is right and want to do it, but we experience external pressures – from our boss, our colleagues, our customers – to do otherwise. As a result, we are not sure how to raise our concerns. The focus here is not on situations where we are tempted to do something we believe is wrong, for our own personal gain and because we believe we can get away with it. While this is a relevant topic, it is for another day.

Now some might say that what we really want is to be able to *feel* like we have voiced and acted on our values. And this desire may lead us just as easily – perhaps more easily – to focus our energy on finding ways to rationalize what we say and do such that it *appears* consistent with our values, as opposed to focusing our energy on finding ways to actually *be* consistent with our values. Research on self-bias would tend to support this view.<sup>1</sup>

Others might point out that the real problem in the starting assumption is the idea of voicing and acting on our values “effectively.” That is, given the organizational and personal barriers to acting on our values, success in this arena is elusive. Thus even if we don’t succumb to the self-justifying bias noted above, many -- if not most of us -- will abandon attempts to follow our values simply because we don’t believe it is *possible* to do so.<sup>2</sup> We may believe that despite our best efforts and courage, we will not be able to change the offending organizational practice or influence the offending individuals, especially if they are our superiors in the organization and/or if they appear to be in the majority.

In addition, we may fear the price we would be forced to pay – anything from social disapproval to negative career consequences and/or financial and family disruptions. Certainly research on whistle-blowers suggests that they often suffer both personally and professionally. We all have seen, heard, or at least can imagine, stories of individuals who raised unpopular or uncomfortable questions and were

---

<sup>1</sup> David M. Messick and Max H. Bazerman, “Ethical Leadership and the Psychology of Decision Making,” *Sloan Management Review*, Winter 1996, Volume 37, Number 2, Reprint 3721, page 11.

<sup>2</sup> A 2003 study conducted by the Ethics Research Center uncovered that workers do not raise ethical issues on the job for two main reasons: 1) They fear personal retaliation; and 2) they are convinced that senior management won’t do anything about an ethical problem once it is brought to their attention.” David Batstone, “Right Reality: You Cannot Train Employees to Be Ethical,” WAG@rightreality.com.

subsequently seen as naïve as or less than committed to doing what it takes to succeed.<sup>3</sup> However, the type of action we are talking about here precedes, and hopefully makes unnecessary, external whistle-blowing. That is, we are talking about efforts to make change within an organization via problem re-definition, creative problem-solving, constructive engagement, persuasion, reasoning, personal example and leadership.

And of course it is important not to underestimate how difficult it can be to even know what our own core values are, and whether or not a particular practice conflicts with them. As has been often pointed out by thoughtful people, ranging from ethicists to political scientists, many of the thorniest choices we face in our lives are less about right versus wrong decisions than about right versus right. If this were not the case, a consequentialist approach to ethics (weighing the relative costs and benefits of different actions) would be both easier to apply and much less necessary. As Robert Kane writes in *Through the Moral Maze*:

The first of much confusion that people have about ethics concerns the value of thinking about it. Ethical argument is not primarily directed at those who are bent on doing evil. It is directed in the first instance not at bad people, but at good people whose convictions are being drained by intellectual and moral confusions.<sup>4</sup>

Given all these objections to the very framing of our opening assumption here, it is important to clarify that this note is not about denying the tendency to rationalize in the service of self-justification. Nor is it about downplaying the obstacles to effective action in the face of values conflicts, or about denying the risks. It is not even about avoiding the complexities involved in actually clarifying what actions best support our values.

Rather this note is about acknowledging that nevertheless, some people *do* voice and act on their values, and do so effectively. This note is about recognizing that there is much to be learned from looking at how and why they do so. And this note is about noticing that they do so not simply in spite of each of the above objections, but also because of their sophisticated understanding of the objections themselves. That is, they make an effort to know themselves and to thus better understand others, diminishing the impact of self-justifying rationalizations. They think strategically about how to implement their values, thereby diminishing the risks they face; and when the risks are unavoidable, they view them clear-eyed and prepare themselves. After all, risk management is not always about avoiding risks; rather it is often about anticipating, preparing for and mitigating them. And they learn to communicate about values openly and clearly, thus ensuring that they have access to more and better information with which to make considered decisions.

This note is about ways to think about and accomplish all of these things and so finally, this note is about **acknowledging and enabling choice**.

---

<sup>3</sup> And once we have tried to raise issues internally, if unsuccessful, we may feel the need to take more public action.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kane, *Through the Moral Maze: Searching for Absolute Values in a Pluralistic World*. M.E. Sharpe, 1996, p.10.

## **The Origins of Giving Voice to Values**

The Aspen Institute Business and Society Program and Yale School of Management *Giving Voice to Values* initiative is a program of research and curriculum development designed to analyze and share the many ways that business practitioners can voice and implement their values in the face of countervailing pressures in the workplace.

The approach to values born from this initiative and described in this note grows out of a rich set of inputs. As we will see in subsequent pages, the power and effectiveness of our efforts to voice and act on our values is often driven by the power and persuasiveness of the stories we tell about them. Therefore, let us begin by sharing the story of how the approach described here was born – both the personal story and the public story.

First to the personal story.<sup>5</sup> When I started work at a business school – the Harvard Business School in the mid-1980s – I experienced culture shock. This was a time when even the student newspapers at business schools crowed that students would attempt a hostile takeover of their grandmothers if they could make a profit at it.

I was fresh out of graduate school with a doctorate in the Humanities and nothing had prepared me for this new world. I was excited by the energy, the clarity of intention and the sheer logic of the place. It seemed the opposite of everything I had known. I would joke with my friends that when my fellow doctoral students in literature and film used to ask, “How are you?” I would be considered suspect – either shallow or ignorant – if I answered without the requisite level of angst, seasoned with knowing despair. At the business school, on the other hand, the accepted response to that greeting was “Great, just great!” delivered in a firm and confident tone with direct eye contact and, preferably, accompanied with an energetic shake of one’s right arm and closed fist. What looking glass had I stumbled through?

Business school and the corporate offices of senior executives I frequented as a researcher, case writer and eventually faculty member were halls of purposefulness and confidence. Whereas the test of intelligence had previously been the ability to take a single passage of poetry or fiction and open it up, revealing multiple layers of meaning and nuance, the performance test here seemed to be the ability to define a problem so precisely and cleanly that all irrelevancy fell away and one was left with a clearly solvable equation or a single principle to optimize. It was a beautiful and heady world, albeit one to which I was unaccustomed.

Twenty years after my introduction to that world, we live in a time when the once astonishing M&A deals of the eighties are surpassed and even dwarfed on a regular basis and when CEOs, having risen to the status of popular heroes in the late 1990s, face heightened public scrutiny as a result of the widely publicized and stunning excesses and abuses of the early 2000s. But despite this fall from grace, the belief in the power and the efficacy of business has not diminished; rather, it is the public’s trust in the business agenda and its methods that has been tarnished. In fact, the degree of public and government

---

<sup>5</sup> Much of this section is drawn from “Is there free will in business? Leadership and social impact management” by Mary C. Gentile in *Handbook of Responsible Leadership and Governance in Global Business*, edited by Jonathan P. Doh and Stephen A. Stumpf, Edward Elgar Publishing Inc., Northampton, MA, 2005, pp. 221-240.

scrutiny and even cynicism that business and its leaders encounter today is a direct reflection of the amount of power, control and capacity they are believed to wield.

This brings us to a fundamental irony about leadership in this arena. Business leaders and aspiring business leaders in free market contexts are attracted to the potential to make an impact, to build something tangible, to manage and control an enterprise and, of course, to make money. This is a world of “can do” attitudes, of belief in the individual’s capacity to make a difference by sheer dint of talent and hard work. And yet, when it comes to the arena of social impacts and ethical action, these business practitioners all too often protest that their hands are tied. When it comes to running their business in a manner that explicitly serves society, both through the value it creates and also the values it preserves, they often appear to believe that the market prevents them from doing as much as they might wish. I find myself wondering how the arena of free market capitalism, so steeped in the orthodoxy of individualism and a belief in the mastery of one’s own fate, can be so constrained? Is there free will in business?

The *Giving Voice to Values* initiative is a response to this irony.

Moving from the personal story, let us consider some of the other inputs to this work. In 2001 and 2002, the Aspen Institute conducted a survey of MBA student attitudes regarding the role of business in wider society. When asked whether they expected they would have to make business decisions that conflicted with their personal values during their careers, half the respondents in 2002 (and more than half in 2001) believed that they would. The vast majority of respondents both years reported it would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that they would experience this as stressful. And in 2001, over half of respondents said their response to such a conflict would be to look for another job; in 2002 that number declined to 35 percent still a significant number. One in five students reported that their business education was not preparing them at all to manage such conflicts, and the majority said they were only being prepared “somewhat.”<sup>6</sup>

Student and faculty reports from business schools reinforce this observation that students expect to encounter values conflicts during their careers. In fact, they have already faced them by the time they return to graduate school. A few years ago, Columbia Business School invited incoming MBA students to write a one page essay about a time when they had experienced a conflict between their values and what they were asked to do in the workplace.

The conflicts these young managers described in hundreds of essays were often quite similar -- pressure to overstate billable hours; to adjust economic forecasts; to adjust earnings reports; to inflate product capabilities or understate the timeframe needed to provide services; to place organizational priorities above individual loyalties; and so on.

But despite the similar stories they told, these students’ responses were sometimes quite different. Many reported their discomfort with such conflicts but a quiet acceptance of the impossibility of resisting the organizational demands. Others, while reporting seemingly identical conflicts and pressures, decided to voice their objections and found ways – sometimes very creative ways – to resolve the conflicts. These students did not appear to be more articulate or more intelligent. Their essays did not express a greater sense of discomfort than the essays of those who did not voice or act on their values. They did, however,

---

<sup>6</sup> “Where will they Lead?” An Aspen Institute Business & Society Program study: [www.AspenCBE.org](http://www.AspenCBE.org)

make the decision to say something. Sometimes they spoke persuasively; sometimes they appeared to be a bit naïve or clumsy. Some succeeded in changing the practice they addressed; others did not. But they spoke up, and that put them on a different path. The question becomes: What enables the choice to speak up?

The Aspen Institute study and the business school student stories bring to mind some research conducted on Rescuers in World War II (individuals who risked their own safety to assist those threatened by the Nazis), trying to identify the factors held in common by those who have been known to act with moral courage in the face of danger. One of the key characteristics such folks tended to share was the experience, earlier in their lives, of anticipating situations where their values would be challenged and sharing out loud with a respected listener what they would do – a kind of pre-scripting.<sup>7</sup>

And thus the *Giving Voice to Values* initiative was born. The educational approach described here provides managers and students of management with the opportunity to identify with someone who knows what their values dictate in a particular situation – as opposed to someone who is wondering what the right thing to do in a situation might be (as is often the case in ethics and values workshops and seminars)—and then to script their response. In other words, this approach is *post-decision-making*.<sup>8</sup> It is not about analyzing what the right thing to do may be or whether to act on our values in the workplace; it's about starting from the assumption that we know what we want to do and then figuring out how we might make that happen –and then practicing our voice.

Of course, many of the thorniest ethical problems in business today are not at all clear cut. However, when all is said and done, even after we have decided what we want to do, acting on that choice is not easy and the courage and quality of implementation can be as, or sometimes even more important, than the quality of the choice.

This is not to say that finding “successful” resolutions to values conflicts is easy, or even always possible. Rather this is simply to suggest that people do try; that it is important and worthwhile to try; and that such resolutions are, in fact, sometimes possible. This is an important distinction – that is, the difference between not knowing the answer to the question of how to implement our values and not believing that there could be such an answer. This is often an unspoken struggle within managers, as well as business educators. In fact, one of the reasons why faculty and managers are sometimes uncomfortable with explicit discussions of the ethical implications of managerial actions may well be because they are not necessarily convinced that it is, in fact, possible to voice our values successfully. And this suggests a need to pay attention to both the approaches that enable us to voice our values successfully, as well as our very definition of “success” in these instances.

Accordingly, this note looks at ways to learn from business practitioners who have already acted on their values. Although informed by research, this is a practical approach. This note does not suggest that the identified strategies always work, or even prove that a particular response is the “right” one. Rather it

---

<sup>7</sup> Perry London, “The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians who saved Jews from the Nazis,” in J. Macaulay and L. Berkowitz, eds., *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social Psychological Studies of Some Antecedents and Consequences* (NY: Academic Press, 1970) and Douglas H. Huneke, *The Moses of Rovno* (NY: Dodd, Mead, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> This phrase was coined by Carolyn Woo, Dean of the Notre Dame Mendoza College of Business, in her description of the approach to values examined in this note.

posits a laboratory where discussants – both students and current managers – can explicitly ask: “What if you were going to act on your values? What would you say and do?”

These seemingly straightforward questions are often not posed – save for the final moments of a discussion where the bulk of the time was spent in identifying the countervailing pressures– and they can have real impact when they are. When addressed in depth, these questions take the discussion out of the realm of “right and wrong” and into the realm of practice – a terrain where discussants, students and business people alike, are often more comfortable, and a terrain which triggers that “can do” attitude that seems to become peculiarly disabled when a question is framed as one of ethics and social responsibility.

In the remainder of this note, we will discuss some lenses or “ways of thinking” about values in the workplace that appear to enable managers to ask and answer the questions – “What if we were going to act on our values? What would we say and do?” When we view values conflicts through these lenses, our confidence and capacity to voice and act on our values can be enhanced.

### First a Word about Values

Before we go further it will be useful to explain what we mean by “values” in this note. Obviously, this is an over-determined word. When asked what our values are, many people, especially businesspeople, may include qualities like “innovation” or “creativity” or any number of other useful and important characteristics. For the purpose of this note, however, we are talking about values that most people would agree have an ethical dimension to them.

In addition, when asked to list our “core” values, we will certainly encounter disagreements about the items on the list and their relative priorities. However, much research has been done over time and across cultures, and although differences do surface, what is important to remember here is that there is a great deal of commonality among a list of values that most individuals identify as central...and that this shared list is rather short.<sup>9</sup>

For example, in *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values Are Put to the Test*, Rushworth Kidder describes the extensive areas of consensus on core values he finds in his cross-cultural surveys, as well as in other research, pointing to psychologist Martin Seligman’s work:

There is astonishing convergence across the millennia and across cultures about virtue and strength...Confucius, Aristotle, Aquinas, the Bushido Samurai Code, the Bhagavad-Gita, and other venerable traditions disagree on the details, but all of these codes include six core virtues.<sup>10</sup>

The virtues Seligman refers to are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values Are Put To the Test* (New York: William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 39-76.

<sup>10</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p.11.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.viastrengths.org/index.aspx?ContentID=44>

Drawing from his own research, Kidder identifies a similar, more simply put, list of five widely shared values: honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the development of their Integrative Social Contracts Theory, Thomas Donaldson and Thomas W. Dunfee posit a set of hypernorms that can guide conflict resolution in economic activities when working across diverse groups. They argue that

...global macrosocial contractors... would not necessarily deny the existence of a thin universal morality, nor of principles so fundamental that, by definition, they serve to evaluate lower-order norms. Defined in this way and reaching to the root of what is ethical for humanity, precepts we choose to call “Hypernorms” should be discernible in a convergence of religious, political, and philosophical thought, or at least it is a reasonable hope that we should discern such a convergence. The concept of a hypernorm is used to establish the boundaries of moral free space, and individual hypernorms would limit the imposition of ethical obligations within a given microsocial community. We call such principles “hypernorms” because they represent norms by which all others are to be judged.<sup>13</sup>

Although we may quibble around the edges, knowing that, in general, a certain brief list of values are widely shared gives us both a useful (because of its commonality) and manageable (because of its brevity) foundation to which we can appeal when trying to address values conflicts in the workplace. Thus, recognizing that our differences or disagreements about values, though real, do not preclude the development and pursuit of *shared goals*<sup>14</sup> is a useful primary position to adopt when we think about how to voice and act on those values.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful here. Near the end of a recent lecture and discussion with a group of graduate business school students and business leaders, one MBA student spoke up. Her comment went something like this: “I am from India and the norms and practices of business there are different. It is often impossible to voice and act on one’s values because certain less than honest or ethical practices are just accepted.”

She went on to talk about a time when she herself had purchased a computer that was defective and how offended she was by this violation of business integrity. And she concluded her remarks by saying that given the futility of trying to enact her values in the workplace in her home country she, instead, focused her energy on working with a non-profit organization that addressed some of the social problems in her community.

The explicit point she was making was that acting on our values is context-specific, particularly across cultures. The implicit point was a sort of justification of her own choice not to try to fight the particular system she had faced prior to coming to school. There seemed an inherent contradiction here. On the one hand, she was saying she had no choice, but on the other, she felt the need to justify the choice she had made.

---

<sup>12</sup> Kidder, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Donaldson and Thomas W. Dunfee, *Ties That Bind: A Social Contracts Approach to Business Ethics* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), pp. 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> Mary C. Gentile, “Ways of Thinking About and Across Difference,” Harvard Business School #9-395-117, 1995, p. 13.

In trying to respond to the woman's comments, it seemed important to find a way to recognize and strengthen her view of herself as, in fact, having a choice. But this must be done without locking her into a perception of herself as unethical. Obviously it is tricky to do both. On the one hand, reinforcing a perception of herself as unethical might lead her to feel disempowered when confronting future conflicts; on the other hand simply reassuring her that she really had no choice after all could fuel the kind of self-justifying biases that can make it easier to overlook or rationalize future failures to act. However, the seeds of a response were embedded in this woman's own comments. She clearly did, in fact, experience the less than honest business dealings she described as a values conflict. On a personal level, she felt offended and cheated by the computer dealer; on a more general level, she acknowledged that the behaviors of some businesses at home were less than ethical. So our first response to her comments was simply to reflect back to her that she obviously was a person with active values.

Second, we suggested that the fact that she did experience values conflicts, at a minimum, complicated her assertion that the norms and business context in India were less than ethical. That is, without denying or oversimplifying contextual differences, she herself had demonstrated that such generalizations are not universal.

Third, once her cultural assumptions had been thus complicated, it was helpful to point out that such contextual pressures to behave unethically are not unique to India. In fact, most folks confronting difficult values conflicts in the workplace are able to point to a story of explicit or implicit organizational or cultural norms that are less than ethical. This comment is not shared with the intent to negate the power of such norms but, rather, with the intent to reveal that they are not unique to one culture, industry or function, and that, in fact, people sometimes find ways to counter them.

Fourth, her story about her work with a community non-profit demonstrates that she is the kind of person who can and does act on her values. The trick was to reflect this reality back to her in a way that suggested that she had effectively found ways to counter widespread social challenges in one part of her life, thereby raising the possibility of seeing herself as the kind of person who might do so in other areas.

By responding in this way, rather than pushing the woman into an argument where her stance would likely be a self-defeating assertion of the impossibility of acting on her values, the group invited her to see herself as a person of values; to reflect on the ways she had acted on her values in the past; and to recognize that if she feels and acts in these ways, there may be others in her business context at home who would as well.

Clearly this discussion did not resolve the question of exactly what she could or would do in the future when she encountered such values conflicts in the workplace, but she left the discussion engaged and positive. Her demeanor had changed and she was engaged in an external (and hopefully also internal) dialogue about options. Her conflicts became "speakable" in a different way. One of the keys to this re-framing of her self-image and her view of her business context was the recognition of some values that she and, presumably, others in her business experience might share.

### Choice

Earlier we asked, "Is there free will in business?" In the context of this note, the most useful answer is that *free will is a matter of free will*. That is, as we saw in the essays written by MBA students, when

encountering similar challenges some folks believed and acted as if they had a choice, and others did not. Of course, the circumstances in any two situations are never entirely equivalent, but the fact is that, even in those examples where the students reported that they did voice and act on their values, they had colleagues in those same organizations that did not. That is, there were people in the same organization and situation who were making different choices about speaking up.

Our intent here is not to conclude that those who spoke up were necessarily better, braver or more competent people than those who did not. Rather, we want to consider these questions:

- Do we think that those individuals who told stories of speaking and acting on their values may have ever encountered a values conflict where they did *not* do so?
- Do we think that those individuals, who told stories of not speaking up, ever *had* spoken or acted on their values in a different situation?
- Better yet, can we think of times when we ourselves have acted on our values, as well as times when we have not?

The answer to each of these questions, we suspect, will be “yes.” And this is probably the strongest evidence we can bring to bear on this subject of choice -- we know we have choice because we ourselves have exercised it.

We have noticed an interesting phenomenon in our interviews with managers and students. When asked to talk about a time when they experienced a values conflict in the workplace and how they handled it, they engage in some interesting self-reflection. The level of self-examination possible when one begins from the premise that someone *has* acted on their values is striking. This starting point seems to free them up to raise the counter-examples-- perhaps because they feel less defensive.

One such interviewee said he wanted to preface his example of a time when he voiced his values by sharing several times when he had not. The process of preparing to tell his “success” story had triggered a comparative analysis, and he began to talk about what enabled him in one situation and what disabled him in others.

Recognizing the fact that we are all capable of speaking and acting on our values, as well as the fact that we have not always done so, is both empowering and enlightening. It is the perhaps the most important of the “ways of thinking” about values in the workplace we want to share in this note. It opens a path to self-reflection and self-knowledge, as well as situational analysis, that we may otherwise short circuit. And looking through this particular lens of choice, we will see that each of the other “ways of thinking” and tools discussed here are only helpful once we have *chosen* to use them in the service of our values. In fact, many of the tools we will discuss, such as re-framing decisions, can be value-neutral: that is, they can be used by anyone to pursue any goal. It is our choice to try to answer the question, “How can I speak and act on my values in this situation?” that is the essential first step.

The recognition that we can – and do – choose to speak and act on our values, as well as sometimes choose not to, allows us to see that our failure to do so in some situations does not cast us as unethical for all time, nor does our success at doing so in other situations relieve us from the necessity to continue to challenge ourselves and remain vigilant. It can be dangerous – and in our experience, it is always untrue – to define ourselves as either always ethical or as always unethical. The first may feed self-justifying bias and the latter may discourage sincere effort.

As psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains: “We value choice and put ourselves in situations of choice, even though choice often undercuts our happiness.”<sup>15</sup> Choice can threaten our happiness simply because it places not only greater opportunities before us, but also greater challenges and potential obligations. So it becomes important to recognize our capacity for choice as well as change. That is, each situation allows us the opportunity to re-define ourselves. But it is also helpful to recognize that voicing our values can become a muscle or a habit. The more we do it, the more we will do it. In our interviews, we found that some individuals had exercised that muscle often enough that it became part of their self-definition. Their challenge then became one of strategy and implementation rather than decision-making – a challenge that was less emotionally taxing and which leads us to our next “way of thinking” about values in the workplace.

### The Normalization of Values Conflicts

Despite the fact that so many respondents to the Aspen student attitude survey expected to encounter values conflicts in the workplace, and that MBA candidates appear to have no problem generating examples of such conflicts, our interviews and observations suggest that often we do not see ethical or moral dilemmas as a true part of doing business. We think of ourselves as just working along, minding our own business, when all of a sudden a values conflict inserts itself into the flow of our lives. It threatens to derail us. It feels as if it is somehow getting in the way of our regular work. It feels unusual, extraordinary, and different. It’s an intrusion into the way things ought to be. We often feel or say, “I never expected to encounter this,” even when the dilemma we are facing is a classic business ethics situation.

Framing the situation in this way can sometimes have a disabling effect. We feel as if we have stepped out of our competent, action-oriented work identities and a more personal part of ourselves is somehow being engaged. This kind of compartmentalization can mean that even if we typically have no problem articulating a contrarian position on a business decision, we may silence ourselves when it comes to ethical arguments.

Precisely because the ethical dilemma is perceived as something separate and apart from business-as-usual, we are more likely to think in terms of just getting through this challenge so we can get back to business. Framing the challenge as “exceptional” can mean that we view our actions as not really expressions of who we are. Instead, they are aberrations that we just need to “get past” somehow.

One interviewee expressed it this way: “In retrospect, this problem really wasn’t that overwhelming once I figured out what I wanted to do. But before I had done that, I lied – instinctively I lied – hoping that it just wouldn’t happen again. Now I realize such choices are an inevitable part of our business journey and it doesn’t seem so huge.”<sup>16</sup> Note that this interviewee is not saying that violating his values is normal; rather, he is saying that facing values conflicts is inevitable.

---

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006), page 102.

<sup>16</sup> These ideas and this quotation are taken from “Get Aggressive About Passivity,” by Judith Samuelson and Mary Gentile, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2005, Reprint F0511A.

If we approach our business careers with the expectation that we will face values conflicts and have anticipated some of the most common types of value conflict in our intended industry and functional area, not only can we minimize the disabling effect of surprise, but also will likely find ourselves framing attempts to speak about these issues in a less alarmist or emotional manner and more as a matter of course. Such an approach can have the effect of normalizing and defusing the topic for ourselves, as well as for the individuals with whom we hope to discuss them.

Similarly, it is useful to become familiar, if not comfortable, with the inevitable risks that come with values conflicts: that is, to *normalize the stakes*. We all recognize that any business decision – any life decision – comes with the risk that it will not turn out as we hope. Our choices come with no guarantees, and that is also true of our choice to voice and act on our values.

In a *Harvard Business Review* interview, Franco Bernabe, CEO of Eni, a major energy-focused industrial group in Italy, comments on the lessons of leadership that guided him through not only a dramatic corporate transformation and turn-around but also a recovery from widespread corruption and public scandal. In particular, he describes the process of normalizing the risks that accompany our choice to respond to values conflicts:

Leadership requires a willingness to take risks. I took many big risks. But I had two psychological parachutes. First, I was young enough that being fired for pursuing the right ideas wouldn't hurt me—it would be to my credit. I could have worked somewhere else. Second, I never used the paraphernalia of the position. Being the chief executive of a company like Eni, and one of the top managers in the country, you have offered to you a number of perks that can make your life different. I didn't take them. ...If I had lost my job and gone back to something more subdued and less glamorous – well, it wouldn't have changed my life. So taking risks didn't seem that frightening to me. I didn't have anything to lose.<sup>17</sup>

Bernabe's two "parachutes" bear a bit more examination. The first one – that he could weather being fired because he was young enough to find another job – is particularly interesting because it runs counter to one of the usual reasons given for *not* acting on one's values: Often people say that they could not act on their values because they were too young, too junior in the organization, and that they would have to wait until they were in charge to actually make a difference. Bernabe takes this argument and turns it on its head. This is an example of the "reasons and rationalizations" for failing to address values conflicts in the workplace – and the kind of re-framing that enables us to counter them – which we will address in more depth later in this note.

His second parachute – the idea that he did not allow himself to become attached to the perks of the job – is more familiar. For example, at the end of the case study "Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer, Inc. (A)," as the case protagonist considers taking a controversial stand, she reflects upon some advice she had received from a business school professor six years previously:

---

<sup>17</sup> "Leadership When There Is No One to Ask: An Interview with Eni's Franco Bernabe" by Linda Hill and Suzy Wetlaufer, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1998, Reprint 98402, pp. 93-94.

He had told students that the first thing to do after graduating was to start pulling together their “go-to-hell money.” Dubinsky took that to mean that she should never put herself in a situation from which she could not walk away.<sup>18</sup>

By anticipating or *normalizing* the idea that we will have to take risks – even career-threatening ones – in service of our values at some point in our work lives, we expand our vision of what degree of freedom we have in our decision-making. The explicit decision to prepare for that eventuality – whether that means saving some amount of “go-to-hell money” or foregoing certain lifestyle perks or, as we will discuss later, understanding our own particular risk profile<sup>19</sup> – again makes this kind of choice both easier to imagine and more “practical” to enact. This is not to say that such a choice will ever be painless but, rather, that looking at such choices in this way – as normal and survivable – makes them seem possible.

Finally, viewing values conflicts in the workplace as a normal and expected part of our professional lives enables us to more easily understand, identify with and communicate with those who place us in these challenging situations. If values conflicts are a normal part of our work lives, then those who present these conflicts don’t have to be seen as villains. They may well be just like us. Commenting on Roy Baumeister’s research on evil, Jonathan Haidt explains that:

When taking the perpetrator’s perspective, he [Baumeister] found that people who do things we see as evil...rarely think they are doing anything wrong. They almost always see themselves as responding to attacks and provocations in ways that are justified. They often think that they themselves are victims.<sup>20</sup>

Although this research focused on human cruelty and aggression rather than the kinds of workplace transgressions we discuss in this note, it usefully suggests that we benefit from recognizing not only our own tendency toward self-justification, but also the concomitant tendency to view others as entirely wrong. Diminishing the perceived distance between us and the individual or individuals who present us with a values conflict can make voicing our concerns less daunting, because we can more easily find some common ground.

### Definition of Purpose

Another way of thinking about values in the workplace has to do with our definition of professional purpose. The way we define our sense of professional or career purpose can help facilitate the process of normalizing ethical questions described above. If we define our professional purpose explicitly and broadly, we will have an easier time seeing values conflicts as an expected part of doing business, with costs and benefits that do not seem unusual or especially daunting in comparison with any other business challenge.

---

<sup>18</sup> “Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer, Inc. (A)” , by Mary Gentile under the supervision of Professor Todd D. Jick, Harvard Business School Case Study # 9-486-083, 1986, p. 12

<sup>19</sup> See p. 14 of this note, “Self-Knowledge.”

<sup>20</sup> Haidt, p.74.

For example, if we think of our purpose as doing well, pleasing our bosses, making a good living (or even a great living), then when we face values conflicts in the workplace, we will see our degrees of freedom narrowed by the desire to please those very individuals who may be presenting us with the values conflict. They are the ones who give us performance reviews and raises, or with whom we need to cooperate in order to accomplish our goals, or to whom we need to make the sale to meet a quota. We may feel we have little choice but to do what they ask.

Of course, the pursuit of any goal – even a narrowly defined goal – can still be guided and disciplined by a set of commitments and rules. Even if we define our purpose narrowly as “doing well financially,” we can still choose to be guided by a set of values and principles that determine how we feel comfortable and justified in doing so, but they may feel more like constraints within which we must operate rather than goals to which we aspire.

If, however, we think of our purpose in a broader sense as building and being part of a company that is a respected corporate citizen – for example, providing valuable products or services to consumers, creating good jobs in a healthy work environment, building a firm that investors can trust to report honestly on its performance – then we will see that we have a broader span of operation when we confront values conflicts. We will have a wider set of positive principles and goals to which we can refer and by which we can guide our behavior.

Addressing this topic of purpose in a broader sense, management thinker Charles Handy poses the question, “What’s a business for?” He responds:

Both sides of the Atlantic would agree that there is, first, a clear and important need to meet the expectations of a company’s theoretical owners: the shareholders. It would, however, be more accurate to call most of them investors, perhaps even gamblers...Nevertheless, if management fails to meet their financial hopes, the share price will fall, exposing the company to unwanted predators and making it more difficult to raise new finance. But to turn shareholders’ needs into a purpose is to be guilty of a logical confusion, to mistake a necessary condition for a sufficient one. We need to eat to live; food is a necessary condition of life. But if we lived mainly to eat, making food a sufficient or sole purpose of life, we would become gross. The purpose of business is not to make a profit, full stop. It is to make a profit so that the business can do something more or better.<sup>21</sup>

Some of us may argue that “making a profit” is a sufficient goal for business and that values come into play only as the “rules” by which we need to play. This is akin to the “rules as constraints” perspective described above. The point here is not to discredit such an approach – financial success, honestly achieved, is nothing to sneeze at – but rather to suggest that if we define our purpose more broadly, it may become easier to find ways to voice and act on our values. And in our effort to voice and act on our values, we may find it more empowering to appeal to a set of positive goals rather than only to a set of moral constraints. In short, we will see that more things matter to us than simply our next promotion and that this is possibly true for other people in the workplace as well – not necessarily everyone but sometimes enough.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Handy, “What’s a Business For?” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2002, Reprint #R0212C, p. 5.

Economist Robert Frank has studied behavioral tendencies and he writes about this effort to bring out the best in our work colleagues in the context of fair trading, stating: “I now believe that the search for a reliable trading partner is not a quest to identify an indiscriminately trustworthy individual, but rather a process of creating conditions that make us more likely to elicit cooperative tendencies in one another.”<sup>22</sup> That is, we are not necessarily looking for that individual who will always be fair, but rather, trying to create or find conditions that will make it likely that more of us will be so. Defining and sharing a professional purpose broad enough to encompass and positively express our values can be one way to create such conditions.

For instance, management scholar Joel Brockner, also writing about ways to encourage fairness in the workplace, provides examples of ways to create conducive conditions. As Brockner explains, “giving workforces outcome-only directives” -- for example, the purpose is to win at any cost -- “can be disastrous.” He explains that, on the contrary, “[b]y modeling process fairness, senior management does more than communicate organizational values; it also sends a message about ‘the art of the possible.’ People are more likely to try to tackle difficult challenges when they see others whom they respect doing so.”<sup>23</sup> We would argue that this managerial example broadens the implicit organizational purpose to include means as well as ends.

Of course, this example begs the question of what we can do when it is precisely the senior managers who are presenting us with a value conflict. However, there are more sources of “respect” than merely rank and power. Later in this note we will talk about some of the tools that might help us tap into them, hopefully engaging the commitment that Brockner describes, even when we are not senior management.

For now, it is important to recognize that this broader definition of purpose does not make values conflicts simple. In fact, it may seem to complicate our lives at times because it will require us to see choices where we may have preferred to simply defer to the “authority” of our superiors in the organization. On the other hand, this broader definition of purpose allows us to dignify our role in the organization at any level. We can see ourselves as part of something respectable and valuable, from entry level employee to CEO.

It also dignifies the values conflicts themselves. These are not seamy little dilemmas that we squirm over quietly and try to forget, rationalizing that they are simply the unfortunate “price we must pay” to survive in a particular firm or industry. Instead, they become opportunities to take a step towards building or preserving an organization we can be proud of. Instead of normalizing the loss of our values, we can normalize the fact that we will be called upon to respond to their challenge.

### Self-Knowledge, Self-Image and Alignment

One of the most powerful lenses through which to view values in the workplace is that of self-knowledge and self-image. In interviews with managers at all levels of the firm, a significant enabler of values-based action is often reported to be the clarity, commitment and courage that are born of acting

---

<sup>22</sup> Robert H. Frank, *What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Joel Brockner, “Why It’s So Hard to Be Fair,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2006, Reprint #R0603H, p. 8 and 7.

from our true center, finding alignment between who we are and what we say and do. Some people say they are able to voice and act on their values because they have always had a strong sense of right and wrong and a need to act on this conviction. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut describes this kind of moral courage as a person's commitment to "shape the pattern of his life – his thoughts, deeds, and attitudes – in accordance with the design of his nuclear self."<sup>24</sup>

However, not everyone sees themselves this way. Let's borrow taxonomy from Gregory Dees and Peter Crampton's discussion of ethical negotiations.<sup>25</sup> They suggest that we might categorize ourselves as "idealists" (those who attempt to act on their moral ideals, no matter what); as "pragmatists" (those who attempt to both act in the service of their own material welfare as well as upon their moral ideas); or as "opportunists" (those who are driven exclusively by their own material welfare). Dees and Crampton point out that most people fall into more than one of these categories depending on the issue, but in our experience with business students and practitioners, the largest group usually self-identify as "pragmatists." They want to act on their values but do not wish to place themselves at a "systematic disadvantage" by doing so.<sup>26</sup> This seems a profoundly hopeful observation, because it suggests that there are many who would voice and act on their values, if they believed they had a reasonable chance of effectiveness.

So given the aforementioned strength and energy derived from acting in a way that aligns with our core self, and operating from the above assumption that not everyone will identify themselves as "idealists," it seems we can enhance our willingness and ability to voice and act on our values by finding a way to view ourselves – by writing a self-story, if you will – that integrates acting on our values with our sense of who we truly are. If we see ourselves as "pragmatists," for example, let's find a way to view voicing our values as pragmatic.

Let's look at an example. We often assume that voicing and acting on our values involves an act of courage. Interestingly, some managers report that their ability to voice their values was driven more by fear than courage. Their fear of violating a particular code or of incurring some external punishment outweighed the fear of bucking the crowd or of refusing their boss's direction.

In one sense, this seems obvious, but it illuminates a relevant debate. There are some companies and business schools that approach their ethics and compliance with a sort of "scared straight" model. They will hire someone who served time for a white collar offense to lecture on how easy it is to start down that "slippery slope" and how terrible the consequences are. We have always been skeptical of such efforts, believing it is more effective to tap into people's positive desires to excel (in this case, at implementing their values), than to feed their fears of punishment.

However, listening to an extraordinarily self-reflective and candid woman describe her ability to voice her values as a result of being risk averse and fear-driven gave us pause. An analyst in a leading investment bank, she was asked by a close friend to share some proprietary research: "I experienced his

---

<sup>24</sup> Kidder, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Dees and Peter Crampton, "Shrewd Bargaining on the Moral Frontier: Toward a Theory of Morality in Practice", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, April 1991, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 146 and 164.

<sup>26</sup> Note that this does not mean that they would never be willing to pay a price for acting on their values. See for example, Uri Gneezy, "Deception: The Role of Consequences," *The American Economic Review*, March 2005, vol. 95, no. 1, pp. 384–394.

request as scary and wrong, but he cajoled, saying, ‘It’s only me. No one will ever know.’ After I refused, he said, ‘I’ve never seen you that firm with anyone. I guess you’ve sold your soul to that company.’” Later the analyst commented, “I hate to say no to anyone and I’m basically a non-confrontational person, but I guess I belong to this place [her investment bank employer] for a while and want to be loyal.”

This last comment about “belonging” to her employer may elicit a gasp from readers but then the analyst proceeded to share other instances when she had raised questions *within* her firm. These decisions collectively illustrated that for her, fear and loyalty actually provided her with the strength to speak out, both inside and outside the organization. Fear and loyalty raised her expectations and her standards for the *firm*, as well as for herself.

It appears that one person’s fear is another’s courage and that it can be useful to frame the mindsets and predispositions for ethical action as explicitly multiple. For example, if some individuals are convinced they are fearful, maybe helping them find a way to consciously use that fear to serve a purpose they value would be more effective than preaching courage to them.

In conversations with managers who have acted on their values in the workplace, again and again people described their ability to voice their values as deriving from some personal identity traits; whether it was their personal confidence, their tendency to be contrarian, their risk-averse nature, their risk-taking nature, their need for clarity, and so on. What is interesting is that the trait enabling one individual may be the opposite of the trait that enables another.

It becomes important for us to create our own narrative about who we are and how being this person enables us to act on our values, as well as what particular risks we face due to this identity. We can construct a “personal values profile,” focused not only on what our values are but on our particular strengths and risk factors when it comes to acting on those values. We can then place a customized network of individuals and resources in place to serve our intention to act on our values.

For example, Professor Linda Hill of the Harvard Business School uses self-assessment in her Leadership curriculum not merely as a tool to identify areas for personal growth, but also as a way to clarify where one may need to build in checks and balances. To illustrate, if we know that we tend to defer to authority, we might seek out a respected contrarian as an advisor on major decisions. This approach is built upon the normalizing of personal challenges, just as the discussion above was built upon the normalizing of ethical challenges.

### Some key self-assessment questions to consider include:

- **Questions of Purpose** (discussed in the previous section of this note): What are your personal goals? Your professional goals? How do you define your impact as a/n: auditor, investor, manager, product developer, marketer, senior executive, etc.? What do you hope to accomplish? What will make your professional life worthwhile? And so on.
- **Questions of Risk**: What is your risk profile? Are you a risk-taker, or are you risk-averse? What are the greatest risks you face in your line of work? Are they personal (livelihood, deportation, legal punishment, etc.); professional (harms to customers, employees, the firm, etc.); or societal (impact on environment, profession, industry, nation, etc.)? What levels of risk can and can’t you live with?

- **Questions of Personal Communication Style/Preference:** Do you deal well with conflict, or are you non-confrontational? Under what circumstances? Do you prefer communicating in-person, or in writing? Do you think best from the gut and in-the-moment, or do you need to take time out to reflect and craft your communications? Do you assert a position, or do you ask questions?
- **Questions of Loyalty:** Do you tend to feel the greatest loyalty to family, work colleagues, your firm/employer, or other stakeholders, such as customers? Under what conditions and given what stakes?
- **Questions of Self-Image:** Do you identify as shrewd or naïve? As idealistic or pragmatic? As a learner or as a teacher? Etc.

Interestingly, there are few “right or wrong” answers to these questions, and individuals who describe the experience of acting on their values will report many different and conflicting self-assessments. Everyone has his or her own “self-story,” or is able to construct one. And one of the most promising levers for enabling us to voice our values appears to be generating a “self-story” that allows us to find ways to align what we think is “right” with who we already think we are. If I see myself as a bold person, I can choose to frame acting on my values as courageous. Conversely, if in my heart I see myself as a timid person – regardless of what I may say in job interviews or at cocktail parties – I can frame acting on my values as an act of compliance. The point here is that the way we incorporate values conflicts into our story can serve to enable, or disable, our ability to act on our values. It can allow us to play to our strengths, or not. Creating this story is not just about self-knowledge; it is about the way we choose to use that self-knowledge.

This is particularly important in light of research suggesting that most of us tend to be susceptible to self-justifying biases or finding ways to view our decisions as positively motivated, even when we would be critical of someone else who made the same choices. By actively considering our personal values profile and crafting a “self-story” that aligns our values, behaviors and self-image with the kind of person who can make the hard choices and act on their values, we are anticipating those choices and pre-scripting our interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, our personal identities are not the only factors contributing to our ability, or inability, to act on what we think is right in times of conflict. As noted by Robert Frank above, the conditions in which we operate influence our behavior powerfully, both in terms of what we believe is possible to do (e.g., Do we think we have any influence in a particular situation?) and in terms of what we actually come to believe about the rightness or wrongness of a particular choice (e.g., Was our initial values-based reaction misguided?). But, again, taking control of the creation of our own self-story can enable us to anticipate some of the organizational and social pressures we are likely to encounter.

## Voice

Earlier in this note, we talked about a series of essays written by MBA students where they described a time when their personal values conflicted with what they were asked to do in the workplace. We noted that despite the fact that many of the situations appeared to be quite similar, some students had found ways to voice and act on their values within the organization, while others did not. The repertoire of

---

<sup>27</sup> “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases” by Robert Prentice, *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1(1) 2004, pp. 57-74.

strategies adopted by those who chose to act inside the organization (as opposed to acting outside the organization, by external whistle-blowing or by leaving) fell into some recognizable categories: looking for a win/win solution; changing the boss's mind through persuasion and logic; going over the boss's head within the organization; building coalitions of like-minded employees; and so on. But the pivotal moment was deciding to speak.

We also noted that there are many different ways to speak, and that one of the most valuable approaches to voicing our values lies in recognizing that fact. When we confront an ethical conflict, we often tend to think that our choices are restricted: we can either stand up and declare our opposition to the offending action, or we can remain mute. In fact, however, it is this stark framing of the options that can result in both greater silence and a less effective voice.

Thus it becomes important to understand:

- That there are many different ways to express our values, and some may work better in certain circumstances than others;
- That we, ourselves, may be more skillful at, or simply more likely to use, one approach over another, and so our ability to see a way to use that particular approach may be the most important determining factor as to whether or not we speak;
- That some organizational contexts/conditions (and some types of leaders) will have a strong impact on our own and others' likelihood of expressing values;
- That there are things we can do to make it more likely that we will voice our values and that that we will do so effectively: namely, practice and coaching.

The first observation – that there are many different ways to express our values and that some may work better in certain circumstances than others – suggests that voicing our values is, to some extent, a learnable skill. As we examine our own experiences and those of others, and as we review research on persuasion, negotiation and influence, we will see that there are many tools and approaches we might use (e.g., assertion, questioning, researching and providing new data, persuasion, negotiation, leading by example, identifying allies, etc.). The point here is that just because we are addressing a question of values and ethics does not mean that we need to preach. Often, the very fact that a situation has an ethical component to it leads us to feel that we must gear ourselves up to be saints or even martyrs; in reality, we often just need to be competent and skillful. We can approach the communication challenge with the same analytical and personal capabilities that we would use in any other situation, whether it is a salary negotiation or an effort to persuade our colleagues to use a new software application. And as with other communication challenges, we will want to consider the needs and desires and emotional investments of the individuals to whom we are speaking, as opposed to focusing exclusively on our own. Re-framing “voice” as “dialogue,” which includes a goodly dollop of “listening,” is another important piece of the recipe.

The second observation – that we ourselves may be more skillful at, or simply more likely to choose one approach over another – may seem to contradict the first. However, it is really simply an extension of it. If our understanding of our audience's needs, desires and perspectives suggests that we approach them one-on-one, as opposed to in a group setting, we may still do so. However, when we do, we will want to use the communication style with which we are most skilled and comfortable. For example, if our most effective style of communication is story-telling and the use of metaphor, we would likely want to play to our strengths, whether the topic is a moral conflict or not. Or, if we are uncomfortable with

confrontation, we may choose to raise our objections through a line of careful questioning rather than assertion. Even if we are not convinced that our personal style will be most effective in a particular situation, we are most likely to speak if we start from the strengths we have, rather than attempting to be an entirely different type of person at a time of stress.

The third observation above – that some organizational contexts/conditions (in particular, some types of leaders) will have a strong impact on our own and others' likelihood of expressing our values – is fairly obvious. Much research has been done to examine the impact of organizational systems and policies (incentive systems, communication mechanisms, hierarchy, etc.) and leadership styles (authoritarian, motivational, open or closed, etc.), as well as the impact of group pressures, on our likelihood to speak and act against the prevailing winds in a particular situation.<sup>28</sup>

This research, as well as our own experience, is important for several reasons. First, it identifies the cost of suppressing divergent voices in the workplace. It also points out the organizational mechanisms and leadership strategies available to managers and executives who wish to encourage their employees to voice their values in the workplace. Perhaps most importantly, it reveals that often we are unaware that we have been influenced by our organizational context. We may come to believe that we agree with the prevailing perspective without realizing that we have been influenced and without making a conscious choice.

Unlike the previous observations and lenses discussed in this note, this last observation appears to contradict the idea that we have a choice to voice and act on our values. In fact, the power and influence of our context should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, we all know of times when we have seen individuals resist these pressures; we probably can think of some times when we have done so ourselves. In order to do so, however, we need to understand these contextual pressures; we need to be aware that we, our colleagues and our supervisors may be influenced by them without always recognizing it, and so must remain vigilant and self-aware. We also need to understand that resisting these pressures may require strategy and skill as much as it requires moral conviction. For example, as Harvard professor Amy Edmondson explains:

Much research on speaking up has focused on extra-role behavior, studying when people are willing to speak up about aspects of the organization or work context that go beyond the demands of their jobs... Yet, *how people view their roles* affects what is seen as discretionary behaviour... (emphasis added)<sup>29</sup>

Edmondson's observations that the implicit organizational definition of our role makes some topics less "speakable," leads us to wonder if we could we make an explicit effort to define our roles and our job responsibilities in a way that makes those same topics essential items of discussion. In fact, simply naming that some topics are not "speakable" begins to change the dynamic.

In another example, in their analysis of "Organizational Silence," New York University scholars Elizabeth Morrison and Frances Milliken suggest a number of organizational features that discourage individuals from speaking up. This research, although discouraging in its finding that it is very difficult

<sup>28</sup> Amy Edmondson, Robert Frank, Irving Janis, Frances Milliken, Elizabeth Morrison, etc.

<sup>29</sup> Amy C. Edmonson, "Speaking Up in the Operating Room: How Team Leaders Promote Learning in Interdisciplinary Action Teams," *Journal of Management Studies*, 40:6 September 2003, p. 1420

to change such a culture, does suggest some mechanisms that the determined individual might employ to find a voice. For example, Morrison and Milliken explain that “the more homogeneous the top management team is with respect to functional training and experience, the more cohesive they are likely to be and the more threatened they might be by the idea of dissent.”<sup>30</sup> Although their work is focused on organizational context rather than on individual action, we might infer that an explicit attempt to test our ideas with a functionally diverse set of colleagues, and also perhaps to seek support from such a group both inside and outside the organization, may help us resist some of the unconscious influence. It may even help us find new ways of expressing our values that would not have occurred to us if we remained more insular in our exchange.

The trick here is to learn from research that demonstrates how difficult it is to buck the organizational system when it comes to speaking up in opposition to prevailing practices or to a supervisor’s directive, but not to be entirely discouraged by it. The more we understand how we are influenced by our context, the better our ability to see through it, resist it and perhaps influence others to do so.

The fourth and final observation about voice – that there are things we can do to make it more likely that we will voice our values and that that we will do so effectively: namely, practice and coaching – is supported by both research and common sense. Research tells us that when leaders talk openly about how they have applied, or are learning to apply, their values and/or to talk about and listen to other viewpoints, they become more approachable and their direct reports feel more able to do the same.

But we all know this anyway. The more we talk about something, the more comfortable we become doing so. This is the kernel of truth we drew from the WWII Rescuers described earlier in this note: those who acted on their values in times of crisis tended to share the experience of previewing and pre-scripting such challenges earlier in their lives. This observation suggests the value of practicing the process of voicing our values as well as the value of simply voicing our commitment -- saying out loud who we are, who we want to be, who we are trying to be.

### Reasons and Rationalizations

When we encounter values conflicts in the workplace, we often face barriers that appear in the form of “reasons and rationalizations” for pursuing a particular course of action that can confound our best attempts to fulfill our own sense of organizational and personal purpose. These are the objections you hear from your colleagues when you try to point out an ethical problem in the way things are being done. Sometimes you don’t even hear them because they are the unspoken assumptions – seeming truisms – of the organization.

It is extremely difficult to make a strong argument against the “prevailing winds” if you feel you are in the minority; or if you don’t feel you have the time to come up with a workable alternative; or if you don’t want to take the chance to present a half-baked response. So this note is about creating a time and space to be in the majority, with sufficient time to come up with a fully-baked and pre-tested response to some of the most common challenges you are likely to face in your workplace. It’s about spending time

---

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Morrison and Frances J. Milliken, “Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World,” *Academy of Management Review*, 2000 Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 711.

with the rest of us who are reading and discussing this note (a “majority” in this moment) in order to learn to unpack and reason through the most common and intractable arguments against ethical and responsible management, and to practice generating responses to these common arguments.

Research tells us that our actions are often directed by our emotions and instincts more than our reason, but that our peace of mind requires us to develop a way of making sense of these actions, even if it’s after the fact.<sup>31</sup> This seems consistent with the tendency, described above, to act in ways that seem most comfortable or safe in our particular organizational context. And this observation might seem to mitigate against the value or usefulness of cognitive or rational arguments for acting on our values in advance of the actual situation. That is, what’s the point of coming up with a good argument if people are going to go with the herd anyway?

But let’s just consider what it would mean if we agree with Dees and Crampton that the majority of us would like to act on our values, as long as we could do so without feeling like we were putting ourselves at a systematic disadvantage by doing so (that is, as long as we thought there may be some way to be effective or succeed). Doesn’t it then seem possible that if we could practice developing and delivering persuasive scripts for voicing our values *before* the fact, this might enable more of us to do so? We might feel less defeated by the context if we thought we had a persuasive leg to stand upon. We all can think of times when we felt a nagging doubt or discomfort with the way our team, our employer or even our group of friends was behaving, but we felt silenced by our inability to think of a persuasive argument to use to resist the trend. We may even have begun to question our own instincts because we could not find a viable way to respond to the reasons and rationalizations around us.

This brings us to another way of thinking about values conflicts in the workplace: the analysis of reasons and rationalizations for the behavior we question, and the development of persuasive arguments or scripts for responding to them. This approach stems from the assumption that we want to do what we think is right. But, to do so, we need to know how to communicate powerfully and persuasively in the face of strong countervailing organizational or individual norms, reasons and rationalizations.

**In order to develop this ability we want to consider the challenging situation carefully and answer the following questions:**

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? What are the *reasons and rationalizations* you need to address?
- What’s at *stake* for the key parties, including those who disagree with you? What’s at *stake* for you?
- What *levers* can you use to influence those who disagree with you?
- What is your most *powerful and persuasive response* to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address? To whom should the argument be made? When and in what context?

Interestingly, these questions are not asking us to apply ethical analysis. Rather they are all about understanding the reasons and motivations – both rational and emotional, organizational and personal, ethical and perhaps unethical – that guide the behavior and choices of those with whom we want to communicate.

---

<sup>31</sup> Haidt, p. 145-149.

What can make this approach particularly useful for tackling values-based conflicts is that, after a while, we will begin to recognize familiar categories of argument or reasons that we typically hear from someone defending an ethically questionable behavior. And, similarly, there are some useful questions, persuasive arguments and ways of framing our own role/purpose, and that of our organization, which can help us respond persuasively to these frequent arguments.

Finally, the very act of recognizing and naming the argument can reduce its power because it is no longer unconscious or assumed; we have made it discussable and even put it into play with equally, or hopefully stronger, counter-arguments. Choice becomes possible, and that is what this note is all about.

Let's take a moment to identify a few of the familiar categories of values conflict and categories of rationalization or argument, as well as some possible types of response – by way of illustration. First of all, there are a number of different ways to categorize both the types of values-based conflicts we encounter as well as the typical arguments and responses we might hear. For example, values-based conflicts might be classified by the generic type of dilemma; by the function or industry where we would most likely encounter it; or by the type of argument or rationalization/reason we might face when responding to it. Sometimes these categorization schemes may overlap. Nevertheless, they offer different ways of enhancing our ability to recognize and respond to values-based conflicts.

If we want to talk about the generic type of dilemma, one example of such a categorization is described by Rushworth Kidder and based on research at the Institute for Global Ethics. Kidder suggests that despite their myriad manifestations, most ethical dilemmas fall into four categories or patterns:

- “Truth versus loyalty”
- “Individual versus community”
- “Short term versus long term”
- “Justice versus mercy”.<sup>32</sup>

You will note that Kidder is talking here about conflicting values, not values versus a lack of values. Many times, we *do* face situations where our own values are conflicted or torn. But sometimes, the conflict exists more in the way the dilemma is described or framed. Thus, being prepared to recognize the ways that the framing of a choice may call different values into play can be useful.

For example, a colleague in our company sales team may use an appeal to personal loyalty as a way to persuade us to violate our commitment to integrity, when he or she asks us to keep silent about their deceptive sales tactics. But recognizing the pattern in this values conflict – that is, “truth versus loyalty” – may enable us to feel more prepared and certain of our response. The conflict moves from the particular and the immediate moment into a broader, more general context, and we begin to see it more clearly at this distance. Once the pattern is clear, we might recognize that our colleague is not showing the same loyalty *to* us (by respecting our personal integrity) that he or she is asking *from* us.

Or we might consider the types of values conflicts that are most familiar in the particular functional area or industry where we work. For example, there are some challenges more common in the world of auditors than in the world of operations managers or sales professionals. Familiarizing ourselves with

---

<sup>32</sup> Kidder, page 89.

the challenge types most prevalent in our own work, as well as the common pressures, incentives and disincentives that affect our choices, can help prepare us for both normalizing and effectively responding to these challenges. It is particularly useful to pay attention to information about the consequences of different choices and, in particular, to any available examples of individuals who effectively voiced and acted on their values in this type of situation. These will not always be easy to find, but even one story can be powerful as it demonstrates that there can be options.

Finally, we might consider the categories of argument or rationalization that we often encounter in values conflicts. Some of the most common arguments include:

- Expected or Standard Practice: “Everyone does this, so it’s really standard practice. It’s even expected.”
- Materiality: “The impact of this action is not material. It doesn’t really hurt anyone.”
- Locus of Responsibility: “This is not my responsibility; I’m just following orders here.”
- Locus of Loyalty: “I know this isn’t quite fair to the customer but I don’t want to hurt my reports/team/boss/company.”

As we begin to recognize these categories of argument, we will become more adept at drawing upon responses to each of them. For example, the appeal to “expected or standard practice” is often an exaggeration. If everyone actually were doing “it” (whatever “it” is), what would be the consequences for business practice and customer trust? If the practice is really accepted, why are there so often laws, rules and/or policies against it? Would you be comfortable if everyone knew you were doing this? Who wouldn’t you want to know? And so on.

With regard to the “materiality” argument, it becomes important to recognize that determinations of materiality are often ambiguous. Rather than being objective, they can depend on the method of measurement being employed.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, some practices are considered fraudulent, regardless of their relative size; that is, some things can’t be just a little wrong.<sup>34</sup>

The question of “responsibility” is another well-considered topic in ethics literature, and numerous guidelines have been developed for assessing whether or not we are required to act.<sup>35</sup> The point here, though, is that this argument is often used when we know we are uncomfortable with a decision or action but are afraid of the consequences of voicing and acting upon that judgment. Therefore, the individual using this argument has already acknowledged that they don’t like the situation, and this provides an opening for further discussion.

Finally, as noted earlier, the question and definition of loyalty can be framed in multiple ways. For example, are we “loyal” when we protect the financial bonus of our team this quarter or when we protect their long-term reputation and productivity?

---

<sup>33</sup> Mary C. Gentile, “Discussions about Ethics in the Accounting Classroom: Student Assumptions and Faculty Paradigms,” *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum, [www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)

<sup>34</sup> “One Off Decisions” case, *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum: [www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)

<sup>35</sup> “Reporting” module, *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum: [www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)

In addition to these categories of rationalization or argument, we will begin to recognize patterns of reasoning and levers that can be useful to understand in our efforts to voice our values. For example, our choices in such conflicted situations can often be framed as “false dichotomies,” pitting idealism against nihilism. One of the most stubborn underlying assumptions in rationalizations of ethically questionable behavior is that a reasonable (and “pragmatic”) aversion to self-destructive behavior is a justification for *any* behavior. To illustrate, some might cite an unforgiving market as the reason for all sorts of financial reporting distortions and operating manipulations. If the market does not tolerate the trade-off of short-term profits for long-term gain in one instance, then this becomes an excuse to abandon the attempt to forge open, honest communications in any instance. This kind of false dichotomy – between unquestioning moral idealism on the one hand and a suspension of all obligations on the other – is often the subtext behind justifications for unethical behavior. However, it usually obscures a more complex reality.

### **Recognizing and unpacking “false dichotomies” is just one common lever for responding to frequently heard rationalizations. Other such levers include:**

- Thinking in the **long run as well as the short run.**
- Considering the situation in terms of the group and the firm’s **wider purpose**, rather than in terms of the immediate transaction alone. For example, what behavior enables them to serve their customers best; to manage themselves most efficiently; to manage themselves in the most honest manner; to align incentives of the firm, the sales team and the customers, etc.?
- Considering the **assumed definition of “competitive advantage.”** This definition sometimes seems to follow the old joke about two lawyers pursued by a bear in the woods. One lawyer says to the other, “We’ll never be able to outrun that bear,” and the other replies, “I don’t have to outrun that bear; I just have to outrun you.” Implicit in this view of competitiveness is the assumption that the point of business is conquest; narrowly defined as outrunning the competitors (whether they are external or internal). This model often results in shortsighted, narrow conceptions of managerial purpose. It can be valuable to suggest an alternative model for competitiveness, based upon overall and long-term excellence, rather than merely “outrunning” the competition. This conception can also allow for consideration of *how* we achieve results, as well as whether we do so.
- Positioning oneself as an **agent of “continuous improvement”** as opposed to the source of complaint. For example, how can we improve this system of incentives and goals to maximize performance while discouraging “gaming” the system?
- Positioning oneself as a source of **actionable alternatives** rather than “thou shalt not’s:”
- Pointing out **addictive cycles** that can cause greater and greater pressures and risks, leading to larger and larger values conflicts.
- Considering who we need and can attract as an **ally** in our efforts.
- Considering the **costs to each affected party** and looking for ways to recognize and mitigate these in order make our arguments more appealing.
- Assuming our audience members are **pragmatists** (as opposed to idealists or opportunists) and looking for ways to make it feasible for them to do the “right thing.” This does not mean that they will never pay a price for their choices (sometimes such choices do mean sacrifice, at least in the short run), but it means that they will not feel as if they have been exploited for doing so. For example, if we want to ask our group to forego inappropriate revenue recognition it might help them to see that we are trying to address the problem at a systemic level, as well. After all, it is the organizational incentives that can encourage such choices.

- Assuming our audience members are pragmatists, we will need to **counter the commonly held assumption of unethical behavior**: pragmatists often expect the lowest common denominator of behavior from those around them. In order to motivate individuals to step beyond this lowest common denominator, it is useful to share examples of effective managers who have made choices based on their sense of responsibility.

The point in identifying and delineating these different categories of argument and rationalization, as well as the categories of values dilemmas, is to help us recognize them when we encounter them; to understand the ways of thinking that produce them; and to be practiced in responding to them.

### Conclusion

This note offers a number of observations about how to think about and approach values-based conflicts in the workplace, as well as a set of lenses or frameworks through which to view our own encounters with such conflicts, as a way of expanding the degrees of freedom and competence we feel. However, none of these observations or lenses will be useful unless we actively practice them. They do not make voicing and acting on our values easy in the face of countervailing pressures. They simply expand the sense of possibility. They help us answer the question: “What if I was to voice my values? How might I do so?”

Most importantly, dedicating time to focusing on what we would say and do, and examining the experiences of others who *have* voiced their values, can build the muscle and the instincts to do so. Sometimes this determination to speak comes quickly; sometimes it follows much deliberation. But the more we do it (and see others do it), the more we believe we can do it, and the more it becomes just one more managerial and leadership activity.

## Ways of Thinking about Values

- 1. VALUES:** Although we may quibble around the edges, knowing that, in general, a certain brief list of values are widely shared gives us both a useful (because of its commonality) and manageable (because of its brevity) foundation to which we can refer when trying to address values conflicts in the workplace. Thus, recognizing that our differences or disagreements about values, though real, do not preclude the development and pursuit of shared goals is a useful primary position to adopt when we think about how to voice and act on those values.
- 2. CHOICE:** Recognizing the fact that we are all capable of speaking and acting on our values, as well as the fact that we have not always done so, is both empowering and enlightening.
- 3. NORMALIZATION OF VALUES CONFLICTS:** If we approach our business careers with the expectation that we will face values conflicts and having considered some of the most common types of conflicts in our intended industry and functional area, we can minimize the disabling effect that surprise can have. We will also likely find ourselves framing our attempts to speak about these issues in a less emotional manner and more as a matter of course. Such an approach can have the effect of not only normalizing and defusing the topic for ourselves but also for the individuals with whom we hope to discuss them. Additionally, by anticipating or *normalizing* the idea that we will have to take risks – even career-threatening ones – at some point in our work lives, we expand our vision of what the degrees of freedom are in our decision-making.
- 4. DEFINITION OF PURPOSE:** If we define our professional purpose explicitly and broadly (inclusive of means as well as ends, for example, or as addressing impacts beyond short term profitability), we have an easier time seeing values conflicts as an expected part of doing business, with costs and benefits that do not seem unusual or especially daunting in comparison with other business challenges.
- 5. SELF-KNOWLEDGE, SELF-IMAGE AND ALIGNMENT:** Given the strength and energy that derives from acting in a way that is in alignment with our core self, we can enhance our willingness and ability to voice and act on our values by finding a way to view ourselves – by writing a “self-story”, if you will – that integrates acting on our values with our sense of whom we truly are. If we see ourselves as “pragmatists” for example, let us find a way to view voicing our values as pragmatic.
- 6. VOICE:** In order to make it more likely that we do speak up about values conflicts in the workplace, it is important to recognize that there are many different ways to express our values (e.g., assertion, questioning, researching and providing new data, persuasion, negotiation, leading by example, identifying allies); that some may work better in some circumstances than others; that we may be more skillful or simply more likely to use one approach than another, and so our ability to see a way to use that particular approach may be the most important determining factor as to whether or not we speak; that some organizational contexts/conditions (and some sorts of leaders) will have a strong impact on our own and others’ likelihood of expressing values; and that there are things we can do to make it more likely that we will voice our values and that we will do so effectively: namely, reflection, practice and coaching.

**7. REASONS AND RATIONALIZATIONS:** When we encounter values conflicts in the workplace, we often encounter barriers that appear in the form of “reasons and rationalizations” for pursuing a particular course of action that can confound our best attempts to fulfill our own sense of organizational and personal purpose. If we begin to recognize categories of argument or reasons that we typically hear when someone is defending a behavior that feels ethically questionable, we will be able to develop and *practice* some useful questions, persuasive arguments, and ways of framing our own role/purpose, as well as that of our organization, which can help us respond persuasively to these common arguments. Finally, the act of recognizing and naming the category of argument can reduce its power because it is no longer unconscious or assumed; we have made it discussable and even put it into play with equally or hopefully stronger counter-arguments. Choice then becomes possible.

Last Revised: 03/01/2010

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values (GVV)*.  
*Now Funded by Babson College.*

**Do not alter or distribute without permission.** © Mary C. Gentile, 2010





Mary C. Gentile, PhD, Director  
[www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)

## Giving Voice to Values

### Student Privileges with Strings Attached<sup>1</sup>

William was delighted when he was selected for a very competitive internship at a consulting firm near his university. Many students had applied, and William was one of only two interns selected. William was immediately assigned to work with Timothy, a recent MBA graduate, on a major assignment for a new client, a company that created electronic games and sold them worldwide.

The client had commissioned William's consulting firm to do an industry analysis that included a study of the demographics of game users in key countries in Europe and Asia as well as in North America. From his own experience as a student, Timothy knew that William could access and download a series of reports on the demographics of game users in various countries around the world from one of the university's electronic resources, the E-Marketer Database. Because he was a current student, William could access the reports for free using his university electronic identification (EID) and password. If the consulting firm were to purchase the reports, they would cost about \$800 each, so the total expenditure would be thousands of dollars.

Timothy asked William to write his university EID and password on a notepad and give it to him, so that he could download the reports and any other university resources that they might need. It would only take a few clicks to download the reports to Timothy's computer desktop, and it would save an enormous amount of money.

Nonetheless, William did not feel comfortable with Timothy's request. In a marketing research course, William had learned that the university's licenses to use databases such as E-Marketer were very detailed and specifically restricted to educational uses by the university's students and faculty. Timothy's request was a direct violation of these licenses and William knew he did not want to participate.

What can William say, to whom, when and how?

Last Revised: 03/05/2010

---

<sup>1</sup> This case was prepared by Professor Minette Drumwright, University of Texas-Austin. This case was inspired by interviews and observations of actual experiences but names and other situational details have been changed for confidentiality and teaching purposes.





### Scripts and Skills: Readings

What follows is a selection of readings which provide insights from research on commonly heard arguments for unethical choices or commonly experienced tendencies toward those choices, as well as suggestions for crafting strategies and scripts to effectively voice our values. In each case, there is a brief description of how we might use the readings to this purpose. The very brief summaries provided here are not intended as a substitute for reading the material, but rather as an advertisement for doing so and a roadmap suggesting how to apply the readings to the cases that follow.

It is important to note that, as with most powerful tools, the insights and approaches presented in these readings can be used for better and worse purposes. It is useful to understand them, both so that we can recognize their influence on ourselves as well as marshal them to our own purpose. Ultimately however, a tool is only as valuable or “good” as the end to which we put it.

#### Reading #1

*“Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases” by Robert Prentice, Journal of Business Ethics Education 1(1) 2004, pp. 57-74.*

This relatively brief and readable essay summarizes psychological research on common decision rules and biases that people employ and that can result in less than optimal or even unethical choices. Prentice’s stated objective is to help educators place future business practitioners “on guard” against these tendencies. He acknowledges at the end of his essay that some research has indicated that mere awareness of decision biases does not protect us against them, although it may make us more aware of the tendencies in others. Nevertheless, he notes that others have had some success in a sort of inoculation against such errors in decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

We have a slightly different purpose than Prentice for including this reading here, however. That is, by understanding these decision-making tendencies, we suggest that we can be better able to unpack and respond to the reasons and rationalizations proffered by others for taking an action that violates our own values. We may be better able to see through and create persuasive scripts for responding to those

---

<sup>1</sup> Prentice also refers readers to a self-assessment survey in *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision-Making* by Scott Plous which can be used to reveal our own decision biases (McGraw-Hill, 1993, pp. 1-12).

arguments. And even if we are unable to change the minds of those who presented the rationalizations, we may be able to strengthen the resolve of others who feel as we do and wish to counter the questionable behavior.

*One of the assumptions here is that we are more likely to find the courage and commitment to act on our own values if we can find the words to express them persuasively, to ourselves as well as to others.* This assumption is based on the observation that often the first step toward acting on our values is the willingness to “go public” with their expression. And alternatively, if we do not express our values, it unfortunately becomes easier to act as if they were never ours to begin with.

In his article, Prentice lists thirteen decision tendencies and biases that may impact ethical choices, along with a description of the research that supports them and examples of their manifestations. The summary below lists them very briefly, but adds suggestions for using them pro-actively as tools for voicing our values, rather than simply reactively as effects to guard against. *These suggestions are intended to transform his list of risks into a list of potential tools as well:*

**Obedience to authority** – Citing the famous Milgram experiments, Prentice describes our proven tendency to obey those in authority. While the author appropriately suggests that we should be on guard against this tendency, it might also be useful to consider, when trying to develop effective strategies for voicing our values, whether there are alternate authorities which we might reference in our scripts (our boss’s boss rather than our boss, for example, or the industry codes of conduct rather than our firm’s common practice, or the applicable government regulations).

We might also attempt to defuse the power of this tendency by naming it. That is, we might acknowledge that we are mindful and respectful of the fact that our boss is more experienced and has more authority within the organization, but that the issue is so important and/or that we have collected so much contrary information, that we nevertheless feel the need to raise it.

**Social Proof** – Here Prentice refers to our tendency to succumb to peer pressure, both because we want to “fit in” and succeed within an organization but also because our very thinking is sometimes influenced and altered by the context within which we operate (“groupthink”). Again we might try to defuse this pressure somewhat by naming it, or we might try to build a coalition of like-minded individuals (either within or outside the organization), to thereby alter the social context from which we derive our sense of “proof.”

For example, one senior managing director in a major financial services firm told us that early in his career he and his wife had discussed the high risk nature of his business and he told her he would rather be fired than violate his own values. Sharing one’s position early on may help to head off the bind that many have described experiencing later in their careers, where they feel somehow alone with their ethical choices and fear that their family will be negatively impacted by their decisions. To the contrary, this executive made his family another important social context from which to derive confidence and support, rather than a source of unspoken pressure.

**False Consensus Effect** – Research suggests that we tend to believe that others think as we do: that is, we may believe that if we think something is unethical, others will as well. This can lead us to trust individuals whom we should not, for example. On the other hand, if we tend toward cynicism, it may lead us to expect the worst in all situations, whether it is warranted or not.

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV).  
Now Funded by Babson College.

Do not alter or distribute without permission. © Mary C. Gentile, 2010

In general, this finding suggests that is useful to “assume nothing” and to test our conclusions with others, in both directions. That is, just as our superiors or peers may not always be as honest as we expect them to be, they may not always be as cynical either. If we assume that everyone is ethical, we may become vulnerable to manipulation, but if we assume that everyone is unethical, we may feel unnecessarily discouraged in our efforts to voice our values.<sup>2</sup> And as with most of the biases discussed in Prentice’s paper, naming this tendency toward “false consensus” can be a useful way to open a conversation.

**Overoptimism** – Research suggests that our optimism can lead to irrational choices: e.g., we will make these sales numbers; we will not get caught; etc. When crafting responses to rationalizations for unethical behavior that are based on overoptimism, it may be useful to both interrogate the factual basis for the arguments, marshaling counter-arguments when possible, but also to appeal to the optimism of our listeners by positing scenarios of how ethical decision-making can help the firm succeed. That is, it is useful to not only question irrational optimism but also to proffer something positive in its place.

**Self-Serving Bias** – Research supports the idea that people tend to look for information that will confirm pre-existing views; to interpret information in ways that support their own view; and to selectively remember the information that supports their view. As with all the biases described here, we do well to consider the ramifications of this tendency for our own judgments as well as for those of others. However, research suggests that awareness of this tendency alone does not necessarily make us proof against it.

Accordingly, one strategy that group leaders or individuals among peers might undertake is to construct a kind of “thought experiment,” wherein the team is invited to generate and support alternate interpretations of the same data. This process may generate some persuasive arguments and serve to soften the ground for our efforts to persuade listeners to consider a different, perhaps less self-serving interpretation.

**Framing** – Research has shown that our responses to the same choice may be quite different, depending on the way the question is framed. For example, Prentice reminds us that “People’s risk preferences change dramatically depending on whether an option is framed in terms of potential loss or potential gain...”<sup>3</sup>, with deciders favoring the potential gain.

Again, this observation can be useful to us both because it helps us to deconstruct and see through the framing that may be applied to make an unethical choice appear necessary or even ethical, and also because it suggests a powerful tool that we may utilize as we frame our proposed alternative action choices. For example, we can frame our choices not only in terms of potential negative consequences avoided (e.g., avoidance of possible legal or regulatory problems, etc.) in an effort to adhere to our values, but also in terms of positive benefits achieved (e.g., greater team cohesion, increased motivation, improved brand value, etc.).

---

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting classroom exercise on the perception of “false consensus” and pre-publication research results of the exercise’s use with MBAs as well as managers, contact Professor Frank Flynn at [Flynn\\_Francis@GSB.Stanford.EDU](mailto:Flynn_Francis@GSB.Stanford.EDU). Flynn, F. “Tough choices.” Unpublished case. Stanford Graduate School of Business.

<sup>3</sup> Prentice, p. 64.

It is important to remember that framing (like all the tools and biases described here) can be an extremely powerful tool, and as noted previously, it can be used for a variety of purposes, for better or worse ends. A useful perspective to maintain when consciously considering ways to re-frame an argument is that our intent is to enable our listeners (or ourselves) to see a position clearly, from a number of different points of view. However, in the end, our goal is to enable individuals to make their own decisions, guided by their own values and priorities, rather than to “manipulate” or trick them into accepting a particular point of view. If we explicitly adopt this position, we invite our listeners to see that they have more choices than they may have thought, and that they do, in fact, have the option to act on their values if they so choose.

On the other hand, if we attempt to use re-framing as a means to manipulate others into accepting our position, we invite a kind of escalating “war of frames” and an accompanying cynicism. To the contrary, the encouragement of “voice” in the workplace suggests that we would welcome the opportunity to test our “values-based” positions in an open dialogue. For after all, we are just as prone to decision-making biases as our audiences.

**Process** – Here Prentice refers to the often described “slippery slope” – that is, the tendency for people to willingly take certain actions that they would have found objectionable had they not been eased into them through a series of smaller, less extreme choices. These small choices make the bigger choice appear less objectionable in context. Prentice, of course, suggests that this observation is useful for placing us on guard against corporate cultures that can make unethical choices appear normal and even expected.

However, we would suggest that this tendency is also useful in thinking about ways to make *positive* impacts in an organization. In his powerful article, “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” Karl Weick argues that: “People often define social problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them...When the magnitude of problems is scaled upward in the interest of mobilizing action, the quality of thought and action declines, because processes such as frustration, arousal, and helplessness are activated.”<sup>4</sup> Weick’s suggestion that “A series of wins at small but significant tasks... reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents and lower resistance to subsequent proposals”<sup>5</sup> may amount to a more positive vision of the “slippery slope.” That is, we may find it helpful to find ways to break down the challenges to our values into smaller, more immediately actionable steps, rather than asking our colleagues to “change the system” all at once.

**Cognitive Dissonance** – This tendency is similar to the self-serving bias described above, and refers to our tendency to rule out information or conclusions that make us uncomfortable because they conflict with already accepted positions. And of course, our colleagues and bosses, as well as we ourselves, are susceptible to this bias. Building an appreciation for contradiction and constructive challenges into the corporate culture may be a useful organizational response to this tendency, but on an individual level, we may need to practice explicitly inviting alternative viewpoints. It may be useful to assemble a network of trusted advisors that includes folks with whom we often disagree but whose intelligence and integrity we respect. And when we are responding to individuals who may be protecting their prior decisions, it may be useful to find ways to appeal to their *other* already accepted positions.

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl E. Weick, “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” *American Psychologist*, January 1984, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Weick, p. 43.

For example, in the “Lisa Baxter: Developing a Voice”<sup>6</sup> case, we see that the chairman of the board was predisposed to defend another executive whom Baxter had recently fired. She was successful in defending her own decision by appealing to another decision that chairman had already taken: that is, his support for a recently approved new strategic agenda for the firm. His initial reluctance to accept a negative view of an executive whom he had supported was resolved into his commitment to another, more powerful position.

**Sunk Costs and Loss Aversion** – Here Prentice describes the tendency to continue to pursue a less than optimal course of action simply because we are reluctant to accept that our prior choices or investments were wrong or wasted or because “people detest losses more than they enjoy gains, about twice as much.”<sup>7</sup>

When trying to persuade individuals whom we believe are experiencing this bias, it may be useful to talk about what we have already gained from the prior decision or investment, even if it’s not a financial gain. We may have other “returns” we can point out, whether they are knowledge, relationships, etc. We may also use stories of how other firms have benefited from similar mistakes, providing an alternative way to view the investment.

**The Tangible and the Abstract and Time-Delay Traps** – Research argues that “vivid, tangible, contemporaneous factors” affect our choices more powerfully than those that are “removed in time and space”<sup>8</sup> and research also supports our usual preference for immediate rather than delay gratification. As Prentice illustrates, it can be “...difficult to decide to pull the plug on a product (even a Ford Pinto or a Dalkon Shield), lay off employees working on the product, and damage the company’s profits in the short-term when the potential injuries are hypothetical at this point, temporally-distant, and again, will be visited upon merely statistical victims.”<sup>9</sup>

The challenge for us then becomes to somehow make the distant seem near; the statistics feel like real individuals; and the hypothetical feel as concrete as strong odds can make it. The use of analogies or concrete stories from our own firm’s or others’ experience may be helpful, the more similar the situation the better, of course. And again, we may explicitly name the ubiquitous pitfall of discounting the future and the distant.

### Reading #2

*“Ethical Leadership and the Psychology of Decision-making” by David M. Messick & Max H. Bazerman, Sloan Management Review, Winter, 1996, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 9-22, Reprint 3721.*

Professors Messick and Bazerman have taken a very similar approach to Robert Prentice in this article. They describe their intent as follows: “...executive ethics has been dominated by the assumption that executives are constantly faced with an explicit trade-off between ethics and profits. We argue...[it] is more commonly affected by psychological tendencies that create undesirable behavior from both ethical

---

<sup>6</sup> “Lisa Baxter: Developing A Voice” is a *Giving Voice to Values* case study: [www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)

<sup>7</sup> Prentice, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Prentice, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Prentice, 67.

and rational perspectives. Identifying and confronting these psychological tendencies will increase the success of executives and organizations.”

This essay is included here because, unlike Prentice who addresses his article to professors, Messick and Bazerman have written their essay for executives. The material covered is quite similar, however, although Messick and Bazerman cluster and organize the various research-driven conclusions about human decision biases and tendencies differently. Rather than simply listing them as Prentice does, they break them into three categories: Theories about the World, Theories about Other People, and Theories about Ourselves. Given the overlap in content, the following discussion presents Messick and Bazerman’s organizational scheme but only describes the biases and tendencies where they are not self-evident or were not covered in the previous discussion.

Under “**Theories about the World**,” Messick and Bazerman argue that when confronted with the complexity of decision making, people often over-simplify in order to find a way to act. Like Karl Weick, they observe our tendency to become overwhelmed but rather than naturally pursuing the strategic re-definition of large problems that Weick recommends, we often fall prey to a set of decision biases (similar to those Prentice pointed out but labeled differently):

- Ignoring low-probability events
- Limiting the search for stakeholders
- Ignoring the possibility that the public will “find out”
- Discounting the future
- Undervaluing collective outcomes (e.g., “Externalities”)

Messick and Bazerman also point out a set of systematic errors we tend to make in assessing the likelihood of certain outcomes:

**Denying Uncertainty** – The authors observe that in our desire to feel in control, we try to base judgments upon past experience. However, this may lead us to deny the importance of chance and to project causal connections between events and actions where there are only coincidental ones.

**Risk Trade-offs** – Here the authors describe our tendency to think about risk in less than coherent ways. For example, we tend to value the total elimination of risk more highly than a partial reduction of risk, even if the amount of damage or loss eliminated is higher in the latter case.

**Risk Framing** – Similar to the discussion of “framing” and “loss aversion” above, the authors explain that people “treat risks concerning perceived gains...differently from risks concerning perceived losses...”<sup>10</sup> tending to favor gains over losses.

Finally, Messick and Bazerman talk about how executives’ theories of the world are influenced by their assumptions about what causes what and who or what is to blame for events. The quality of their ethical actions is related to the quality of their analysis, so these assumptions are important to understand. The authors observe executives’ tendencies to:

---

<sup>10</sup> Messick and Bazerman, p. 13.

**Focus on People** – We often blame people because it is easier to imagine eliminating “one bad apple” than changing an entire system.

**Different Events** – Here the authors explain that often people find it difficult to come to common decisions about why things happen because they are explaining different phenomena. In the terms introduced above, are we explaining the effects of a particular person or of an entire system?

**Sins of Omission** – The authors point out that when we try to find who or what to blame for a particular situation, it is easier to observe and judge the quality of what did happen than of what failed to happen.

As Messick and Bazerman turn to “**Theories about Other People**,” they identify biases that can cause executives to make less than accurate judgments about people and thereby contribute to poor and unethical decisions. Here they talk about “Ethnocentrism” and “Stereotypes.” Understanding these tendencies and biases can again enable us to see through our own and others poor decisions, but they also can provide us with insight that can improve the “scripts” we prepare for persuading others to consider our values-based positions. For example, understanding that we tend to harbor “in-group favoritism” can enable us to both name and try to defuse that tendency, but also perhaps to try to find voices from within the so-called “in-group” to become allies with us in raising a values-based position.

Finally, Messick and Bazerman talk about executives’ “**Theories about Ourselves**,” pointing out that the confident individuals who often become business leaders may be especially vulnerable to the “illusion of superiority,” “self-serving fairness biases” and “overconfidence.”

Both the Prentice and Messick and Bazerman essays are described here because their approach and examples differ, although the content overlaps. Different audiences may find one easier to use than the other. However, in both cases, the assumption is that by understanding these biases and tendencies, we can try to protect ourselves from falling prey to them.

But our intention here, as noted above, is somewhat different. We suggest that in addition to increasing awareness of personal biases, knowing about these tendencies can help us to unpack and better argue against those commonly heard reasons and rationalization for less than ethical actions in the workplace.

### Reading #3

*“Ways of Thinking About and Across Differences” by Mary C. Gentile (Harvard Business School #395-117, January 1995.)*

In this essay, Gentile describes and critiques many of the typical reasoning pitfalls we fall into when dealing with questions of diversity, whether it is gender, ethnic, racial or religious diversity, or even diversity of thought and ideology. Examples of various “escapes” from these pitfalls are also included in the form of questions to ask ourselves and others. The author then provides a framework for thinking about and re-framing these same questions.

Although this essay focuses specifically on diversity, many of the reasoning patterns and frameworks described can be applied to other sorts of values conflicts as well, and so it is included here as a suggested reading. In particular, the essay notes that anthropologists, linguists and philosophers have pointed out a tendency in human thought and language toward duality or oppositionality. We tend to

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV).  
Now Funded by Babson College.

Do not alter or distribute without permission. © Mary C. Gentile, 2010

view situations through a framing lens of right/wrong, either/or, or you/me. Gentile discusses the power of naming this tendency and thereby revealing the ways in which it can distort the real impacts and the variety of choices available to us. The author goes on to share nine reasoning patterns that illustrate and critique this tendency toward dichotomies that can limit our thinking. Six of these patterns are particularly relevant to us here:

**Mary Ann Glendon’s “Rights Talk”**<sup>11</sup> – Harvard Law professor Glendon describes a tendency she sees in American discourse toward emphasizing individual “rights” to the exclusion of balancing “responsibilities,” thereby limiting the ability to find reasonable and fair resolutions to societal conflicts. This trap of seeing the imposition of a “responsibility” as a constraint on one’s individual “rights” can limit our ability to recognize that personal sacrifice for a greater organizational or even societal good can be a positive outcome, even for the one who appears to be making the sacrifice. That is, this kind of dichotomy – rights OR responsibilities, instead of rights AND responsibilities – can limit our ability to recognize broader, shared purposes that we could otherwise embrace as a personal, as well as social, benefit.

**Chris Argyris’s “Defensive Reasoning”** – Organizational scholar Argyris describes managers’ tendency toward “defensive reasoning” and explains that: “Defensive reasoning encourages individuals to keep private the premises, inferences, and conclusions that shape their behavior and to avoid testing them in a truly independent, objective fashion.”<sup>12</sup> He observes that this behavior is born out of a view that we are either winners or losers, in control or controlled, and that therefore, in an effort to protect ourselves from perspectives that may threaten our perceived status, we become closed off from new information or points of view. Argyris’ intent is to illustrate how this approach leads to poor decisions because it precludes learning (which by definition is about engaging with new ideas, different from the ones we came in with). For our purposes here, Argyris’s observations can illustrate why folks can be closed toward our efforts to voice our values, and they suggest a way to frame this effort as about “learning” and new information/data that can enhance all of our decision-making.

**Self-Definition through Oppositionality** – Simone de Beauvoir<sup>13</sup> wrote about people’s tendency to define themselves in opposition to others and how this limits their ability to identify with, understand and even value the viewpoints of others. For our purposes here, this insight is important for it suggests that we may often find it effective to voice our values in ways that show how they are linked to, continuous with or relevant to the perspectives, goals and identities of the very people we are trying to persuade. In other words, allow them a way to accept our perspective that permits them to change without requiring them to hate their past. Look for the goals that we already share and appeal to those.

**Shelby Steele’s “Seeing for Innocence”** – In his book, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*<sup>14</sup>, Steele provides an apt illustration of the phenomenon described above. Although he is talking about U.S. race relations, his observations hold relevance for other conflicts over values as well. He illustrates how difficult it can be to change our behavior if that change requires accepting that

---

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*. (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Chris Argyris, “Teaching Smart People How to Learn” *Harvard Business Review* (May-June 1991), p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction to The Second Sex,” *New French Feminisms*, ed., Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

we were somehow “guilty” previously. This phenomenon explains the power of the “rationalizations” we and our colleagues often construct to defend behaviors that may otherwise violate our values.

**Thomas Gilovich’s *How We Know What Isn’t So*** – Gilovich’s book<sup>15</sup> is a readable summary of many of the types of reasoning biases and pitfalls described by Prentice and Bazerman and Messick above. In particular, Gentile summarizes some of the tendencies that are most relevant when we encounter people or ideas different from our own, along with some of the corrective tactics that Gilovich suggests – tactics that could be adopted both for testing the validity of our own conclusions and for countering common rationalizations for apparently unethical behavior.

**Pareto Optimality/Scarcity Thinking** – Gentile defines and describes the limitations of these common reasoning patterns. The *pareto optimality* condition in equilibrium models of optimal resource allocation and a preoccupation with *resource scarcity*, although helpful in some instances, can both be premised on false assumptions; can operate to obscure deeper conditions of inequity; and can constrain creativity and positive change. They are both often adopted to defend choices that may challenge our values of fairness and compassion, and so understanding their limitations may be useful in crafting response “scripts.”

After illustrating the various forms of dichotomy that can limit our reasoning and values choices, Gentile’s framework for *Reframing Diversity* may be a useful tool to help us better understand and ultimately influence the individuals with whom we disagree in a values conflict. This model consists of six observations about difference that can lead us to re-think the way we view and position ourselves in relation to the individual whom we are trying to influence. (And the essay offers an example of the application of this framework.)

Briefly the model includes the following insights. When confronting a difficult values-based conflict, this framework calls for recognizing that we, and our audience, all have *multiple identities* within ourselves: we are not simply representatives of one perspective or value system or group identity. So for example, it may be useful to remind the individual whom we are trying to influence of a time when he or she had taken a stand similar to our own.

Secondly, different ones of these multiple identities may feel more *salient* at one time, in one context or another. And there may be different *costs and benefits* associated with identifying with one or another of these identities in different contexts. Therefore it may be helpful to understand the pressures that are leading the person we are trying to influence to take a particular stand at this point in time. These insights can help us to craft a response or script that is driven by the needs and interests of the person we are trying to influence, rather than by the reasons that would be most convincing to us.

Some of us may have a *choice* of whether we are publicly viewed as representing an identity or perspective and some may not. Therefore the challenge to take a different position or to even be heard if we try to do so, may be different. For example, if the person we are trying to influence has a history of taking a particular kind of position, it may be more difficult for him or her to change this stance.

---

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn’t So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

Therefore, it might be useful for us to talk not only about why we think they should change but also to suggest an approach and/or a story they might employ to do so.

We all are capable of, and indeed have, *redefined or changed* our positions and values at some times. This is the lesson of the *Giving Voice to Values* exercise, “A Tale of Two Stories,” and it signals the importance of viewing the individual we are trying to influence as a complex person, driven by varying motivations. In this way, we may be less likely to escalate our differences into all out conflicts (i.e., “s/he is an unethical person, or is always wrong”), and we may be more likely to look for the kinds of values-based stands he or she has taken in the past, so that we can appeal to that side of the person.

And finally, our differences do not preclude the identification and pursuit of some *shared goals*. This of course is the challenge of our re-framing.

### Reading #4

*Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* by Howard Gardner (Harvard Business School Press, 2006)

Gardner describes how and when people are most likely to change their minds about all manner of things. In the first chapter he presents seven “levers” that can be helpful in attempts to change our own and others’ minds about how to approach a particular decision. The levers are outlined on pages 14—18 and they include:

**Reason** – “Reason can involve sheer logic, the use of analogies, or the creation of taxonomies.”<sup>16</sup>

**Research** – Research may include gathering data, performing due diligence and/or collecting examples to support one’s position.

**Resonance** – “A view, idea, or perspective resonates to the extent that it feels right to an individual, seems to fit the current situation, and convinces the person that further considerations are superfluous...Resonance often comes about because one feels a ‘relation’ to a mind-changer, finds that person ‘reliable’ or ‘respects’ that person...”<sup>17</sup>

**Representational Redescriptions** – Gardner has found that people are more likely to change their minds about something if the new concept can be presented in a variety of different formats: for example, with numbers; via a verbal expression of the supporting theory; in an analogy or story; with case examples; graphically; visually (e.g., a cartoon or photograph); etc.

**Resources and Rewards** – Gardner observes that the availability of resources or rewards, as enablers or incentives to change minds and behaviors, can support this change. However, without the presence of some of the other levers, such a change is likely to be only temporary.

---

<sup>16</sup> Gardner, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Gardner, pp. 15, 16.

**Real World Events** – Gardner observes that events in the wider societal context can aid or hinder our efforts to persuade people to change their minds about a particular decision. It becomes important to pay attention to the world outside the organization, and to consider how to tap or respond to such events. For example, during the corporate scandals of the late 1990s and early 2000s, individuals could point to daily media stories on the personal and public costs of violating and losing the trust of consumers, investors and regulators to support their arguments for greater integrity and transparency.

**Resistances** – This last item is not really a “lever;” rather it is more of a barrier that needs to be understood. Gardner observes that there are always factors that mitigate against changing minds, including the fact that as we age, we become more and more invested in our previous ways of seeing and ordering the world. The “switching costs,” if you will, feel higher. The stronger the resistance, the more important it is for the other levers to be powerful and aligned.

As we scan Gardner’s list, it seems apparent that often our values-based positions are rooted in a sense of “resonance.” That is, a particular position feels right or wrong to us. However, as we consider how to craft a strategy and scripts for persuading others to see and hopefully accept our position, we have the opportunity to both build a stronger and more persuasive argument, and also perform a sort of due diligence on our own initial responses. Is our initial response really right?

We also can note that, while our own sense of what is right may make further arguments feel unnecessary, we are more likely to be effective in influencing others if we attempt to utilize as many of the levers identified here.

Gardner also notes that the selection of formats for expression (with regard to the 4<sup>th</sup> lever, “Representational Redescriptions”) may be influenced by our target audience. For example, he notes that stories are particularly useful in attempting to influence large, diverse groups, while theories can be used in communicating with smaller, more homogeneous groups, and that of course, interpersonal insights and skills are critical when addressing individuals personally.<sup>18</sup>

He also notes that we may find it less difficult to change minds “...when individuals find themselves in a new environment, surrounded by peers of a different persuasion (for example when one enters college), or when individuals undergo shattering experiences...or encounter luminous personalities.”<sup>19</sup> Obviously, we cannot – and would not want to – arrange some of these factors, but we may be able to utilize the observation that a new environment or exposure to peers with very different points of view can be helpful. For example, something as simple as having a conversation off-site may shift the usual dynamics.

Finally, Gardner identifies a number of “tools” that may be used by those who wish to influence or change another mind.<sup>20</sup> These tools include:

- Emphasizing the commonalities between yourself and your audience. What do you have in common, such as profession, ultimate goals, background experiences, etc.?
- Inviting your target audience to collaborate with you on a shared agenda.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gardner, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Gardner, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Gardner, pp. 160,161.

- Establishing a two-way dialogue, so that you can engage your audience's interest and ensure that your viewpoints are presented in ways that are relevant and resonant to them.
- Paying attention to the tone of the exchange, and trying to keep it positive and open rather than hostile.

### Reading #5

*“How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, and Moral Imagination”*  
by Minette E. Drumwright and Patrick E. Murphy, *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 33, no. 2, Summer 2004,  
pp. 7-24.

Most of the readings noted here provide insights about the ways we tend to think, feel and talk about a wide variety of choices and preferences encountered in any business function. This essay by Drumwright and Murphy, however, is particularly focused on marketing-related decision making. The authors interviewed advertising agency personnel in order to identify the types of values conflicts they reported experiencing and to understand how these professionals make choices about those conflicts. The essay both identifies the reasons and rationalizations often used to justify choices that appeared to raise values conflicts, as well as some possible responses to those reasons. And finally, the authors describe what organizational practices enabled some agencies to more openly voice and act on their values.

Drumwright and Murphy identify a number of reasons and rationalizations used to justify choices, even when they appeared to raise values conflicts, including:

- “Consumers Are Smart”
- “Passing the Buck” (to any number of parties: families, the law, media, regulators, colleagues, etc.)
- “What is Legal is Moral”
- “The First Amendment Misunderstanding” (that is, “free speech” is mistakenly equated with the idea that “all speech is equal” and should therefore be protected)
- “Going Native” (that is, getting too close to a client and therefore failing to see clearly when they or the marketers are crossing ethical lines)
- “The Ostrich Syndrome” (that is, just deciding not to ask questions to which we may not want to hear the answers)
- “Compartmentalization” (that is, choosing not to focus on the broader impacts of what one is doing)
- “The Client is Always Right”
- “Ethics Is Bad for Business” (that is, the assumption that ethics is only about constraining our degrees of freedom and therefore limiting our business choices)
- “Pandora’s Box Syndrome” (that is, fear that voicing a values concern will lead to never ending stream of other challenges).

In this essay, the authors provide marketing-related examples of each of these perspectives, as well as some possible arguments to use in trying to respond or reframe them. Although many of the “rationalizations” are actually illustrations of the more generic list of biases we see with Prentice and Bazerman and Messick, this essay is especially suited to be used as an accompaniment to Marketing case examples of values conflicts.

**Reading #6**

*“Reporting,” by Mary C. Gentile, Giving Voice to Values curriculum*

Just as the Drumwright and Murphy article can be used to generate discussions of how to voice our values in the Marketing context, the “Reporting” module of the *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum illustrates ways to raise such discussions in an Accounting context. It is composed of a brief introduction, a suggested video clip and 4 case examples, and an annotated bibliography of 8 possible readings with suggestions on how to use them. Included is an essay titled “Discussions about Ethics in the Accounting Classroom: Student Assumptions and Faculty Paradigms,” which is unique to the *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum and contains a number of tailored examples of responses to often heard rationalizations for violating accounting standards.

Last Revised: 03/01/2010

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV).  
Now Funded by Babson College.

**Do not alter or distribute without permission.** © Mary C. Gentile, 2010





### Reasons and Rationalizations: An Exercise<sup>1</sup>

#### Objectives

- To learn to unpack and reason through the most common and intractable of the arguments against ethical and responsible management.
- To practice generating responses to these common arguments.
- To introduce the 3 steps for responding to values conflicts:
  - Analysis and Generation of “Scripts”
  - Peer Coaching
  - Voiced Commitment

This exercise is about the barriers we confront when we encounter values conflicts in the workplace.

These barriers often appear in the form of “reasons and rationalizations” that can confound our best attempts to fulfill our sense of organizational and personal purpose. These are the objections you hear from your colleagues when you try to point out an ethical problem in the way things are being done. Or sometimes you don’t hear them because they are the unspoken assumptions of the organization.

It’s extremely difficult to make a strong argument against the “prevailing winds” if you feel in the minority; or if you don’t feel you have the time to come up with a workable alternative; or if you don’t want to take the chance to present a half-baked response. So today is about being in the majority, with plenty of time to come up with a fully-baked and pre-tested response to some of the most common challenges you are likely to face in your workplace.

These scenarios place you in situations where you need to make a choice and communicate it effectively. The scenarios begin from the assumption that you want to do what you think is right, but you need to know how to communicate powerfully and persuasively in the face of strong countervailing organizational or individual norms, reasons and rationalizations.

---

<sup>1</sup> The cases in this exercise were inspired by interviews and observations of actual experiences but names and other situational details have been changed for confidentiality and teaching purposes.

### After reading the scenario, please work through the following questions:

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? That is, what are the **reasons and rationalizations** you need to address?
- What is at **stake** for the key parties, including those who disagree with you?
- What **levers** can you use to influence those who disagree with you?
- What is your most **powerful and persuasive response** to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address? To whom should the argument be made? When and in what context?

## Case #1

Maureen works as an engineering manager in the Product Group for a leading computer systems company. She recently learned, through informal conversation with some of her colleagues, that the firm's single-wipe hard-drive reconfiguration process is failing 5% of the time. This means that customers can be purchasing reconditioned hard-drives that still have the previous owner's data on them. She and her colleagues speculate that it could cost upwards of \$5 million to address this glitch with the reconfiguration process, so no one really wants to name or "own" the problem. After all, there have been no complaints outside the company and this has probably been going on for at least 6 months.

Still Maureen is uncomfortable. She is worried not only about meeting the expectations of customers who have paid for a clean system, but also about the violation of privacy of the previous owners of these systems. It's just not a product situation she can feel good about.

Ideally, Maureen would like to get her colleagues to take the concern up the organization together with her. She thinks it will have more impact that way. On the other hand, no one wants to be the one to break this news. Especially since there have been recent cutbacks, money is tight, and no one wants to have to charge more against their group's expenses. At least for now, it feels to folks in her group that "ignorance is bliss." And no one expects to be thanked for calling attention to the problem. The question is: who will be blamed if it surfaces?

What should she say, to whom, when and how?

### **Discussion Questions**

- **What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? That is, what are the *reasons and rationalizations* you need to address?**
- **What's at *stake* for the key parties, including those with whom you disagree?**
- **What *levers* can you use to influence those with whom you disagree?**
- **What is your most *powerful and persuasive response* to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?**

## Case #2

Jeff is proud to manage the highest performing sales team in his computer hardware company. His group focuses on institutional end-users and has led the firm for almost two years now. Jeff took over the group 9 months ago and is pleased and relieved that they have been able to continue the winning streak under his leadership.

Nevertheless, lately he has been finding himself losing sleep over an ever growing list of questionable practices he had begun to notice. He recognizes the intense pressure his folks are under to meet and even exceed their numbers – pressures that come from the company, on the one hand, and from the intense personal competitiveness that his salespeople bring to their jobs on the other. And then there are the bonuses, and the desire to please, and thereby retain customers.

Nevertheless, over the past few months, as he becomes more familiar with his staff and their routines and as they come to trust him more, Jeff sees evidence of activities that worry him: sales representatives who override the sales reporting systems in order to get the customer the price he or she wants (Jeff heard about this one from a colleague in operations who was complaining about unrealistic demands.); reps who interact inappropriately with customers (for example, Jeff has heard rumors of reps sharing pornography via the company e-mail), in order to win their loyalty; reps who over-promise or who use special promotions inappropriately in order to seal the deal (again, rumors); reps who submit unrequested credit financing applications for their customers in order to get the associated bonus (in this instance, one of the administrators processing the request approached Jeff because the paperwork looked fishy to him); etc.

Jeff is concerned about these practices for many reasons, but he is also worried about messing around with a winning formula. He wants to clean up his shop but doesn't want to undermine the motivation and competitive spirit of his staff.

What should he say, to whom, when and how?

### Discussion Questions

- **What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? What are the *reasons and rationalizations* you need to address?**
- **What's at *stake* for the key parties, including those with whom you disagree?**
- **What *levers* can you use to influence those with whom you disagree?**
- **What is your most *powerful and persuasive response* to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?**

Last Revised: 02/28/2010

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values (GVV)*.  
Now Funded by Babson College.

Do not alter or distribute without permission. © Mary C. Gentile, 2010





### Naivete or Boldness? (A)<sup>1</sup>

Denise Foley was facing the most difficult professional challenge of her life and the irony was its source was the very same man who had changed her career sixteen months ago – dramatically, forever and, she had thought then, for the better. After the previous CEO had been fired from the major regional hospital where Foley had worked for several years, a new executive had assumed leadership. After only a month and half, he plucked Foley from the role of Chief of Nursing to be named Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.

Foley embraced her new responsibilities with relish and commitment. She felt the hospital had given her so much: career opportunities, the chance to complete her MBA and strong mentors. This was an opportunity not only to grow and face new challenges, but also to give back to the institution.

However, just over a year into her new role, she found herself in the midst of a professional crisis. After taking a serious look at the situation he had inherited from the previous chief, her new CEO had contracted with a consultant who painted a bleak financial picture for the institution. The consultant advised, and the CEO agreed, that the best course of action would be to sell the hospital to a for-profit institution. This was not an entirely surprising proposal; in fact, it was the path that many non-profit hospitals were taking to try to solve their financial difficulties. Foley's CEO was entirely behind the strategy.

The problem was, though, that Foley thought the consultant's assessment was incorrect. She didn't know if he was consciously manipulating the numbers or if, seeing hefty fees coming his way, he actually came to believe his own counsel. Meanwhile, the CEO did not have other sources of good information; lacking confidence in the hospital CFO, he had kept him out of the analysis.

The stakes were high for all involved. The CEO needed to solve his institution's financial problems and felt the sale was his best shot. However, he needed unwavering support from his COO to make the strategy work. Foley had many concerns. First of all, she didn't believe the consultant's numbers and was convinced that if the sale went through, the new parent would ultimately close her hospital. She

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise attributed, the cases included here were inspired by interviews and observations of actual experiences but names and other situational details have been changed for confidentiality and teaching purposes.

believed this would hurt the consumer; the closing of her institution would leave the community with only one local provider, and price and service suffer when hospitals do not face competition.

Even if she was wrong about the eventual fate of the hospital, Foley was concerned that the hospital service array would be cut: for example, her hospital was the only source of mental healthcare in the area but this was traditionally a less profitable offering. And Foley knew that that some of her institution's community service and charitable offerings would be cut as well. Based on the local governments past performance, she was not confident that other public funds would be well-spent in making up for this loss.

On the other hand, Foley was acutely aware that the CEO was counting on her support. She feared that he would see her challenge as a defection, or a narrowly motivated concern about her own job. He had made a big commitment to her when he promoted her, and she felt a strong sense of loyalty and obligation.

The personal stakes were very high for Foley, too. If she had to leave the hospital, she would need to relocate to find another position and such a disruption would take a high toll on her family – especially her high school age son. And this potential loss to her family was compounded by the thought of losing a highly valued colleague in her CEO. She really *wanted* to agree with him.

Foley knew that some might say she was being overly scrupulous in her soul searching and needlessly tormenting herself. After all, the CEO was the ultimate arbiter and perhaps he and his consultant had information that she did not. She was still new to the C-Suite and one could argue that the ink on her MBA was still damp. Did she really have to take on the responsibility for this decision? Couldn't she just do her best to make the CEO's preferred course of action work out?

But Foley was convinced the CEO was wrong and knew she could not support a decision in which she herself did not believe. She told herself that if you accept a senior position in an organization, then the organization is counting on you to bring all your best gifts and insights to bear in that position.

What should she say, to whom, when and how?

### Discussion Questions

- **What are the main arguments Foley is trying to counter? That is, what are the reasons and rationalizations she needs to address?**
- **What levers/arguments can Foley use to check her own reasoning and motivation, and to influence the CEO, and how might they be informed by an understanding of the biases to which Foley and her CEO are most vulnerable?**
- **So what should Foley do and say?**

Last Revised: 03/01/2010

This material is part of the **Giving Voice to Values** curriculum collection ([www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org)).  
The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for *Giving Voice to Values (GVV)*.  
Now Funded by Babson College.

Do not alter or distribute without permission. © Mary C. Gentile, 2010