GIVING VOICE TO VALUES: THE “HOW” OF VALUES—DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

Dr. Mary Gentile, Beideman Visiting Scholar
Oskin Leadership Institute
Giving Voice to Values was developed out of my own experience. I spent ten years as an educator at the Harvard Business School. I left Harvard in 1995 to consult with MBA programs and business education nonprofits around the world. My focus was on leadership, management, and business ethics. I also did some coaching and leadership development work with corporations.

In the late 1990s, I had a crisis of faith. I began to feel that the work I had been doing for several decades was really for naught. I began to think that trying to teach business ethics in business schools was, in itself, unethical. I also began to see a pattern; every few years there would be a plethora of business scandals.

First, the scandals would hit the business press. Then, the deans of the business school where I was working would get angry phone calls from alumni saying, “The value of our brand is being degraded because there are graduates from our MBA program being handcuffed on the front pages of the business press.” Donors would come forward saying, “You’ve got to do something about this.” Usually what would happen next is that after some soul-searching a press release would go out: “We’ve hired a new faculty member.” “We’ve created a new center.” “We’ve designed a new required course around values, leadership, and ethics.” Then, a few years later, the whole cycle would start again.

My second crisis of faith occurred when I was invited to be on a panel at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at University of Santa Clara. The director of the center, Kirk Hanson, was putting together a panel to debate whether or not any progress had been made in the past 25 years on training business leaders to be ethical. He asked me to be on the side of the debate where I’d have to argue that progress had been made. I had to tell Kirk that I didn’t think I could honestly say that. I wasn’t sure we could claim to have made significant progress.

The third crisis of faith is probably the most important one. In my own teaching and in talking to scholars at business schools around the world, I began to notice that we would raise issues around values and ethics in a very formulaic way. We would present a case study (some sort of ethical business dilemma), and the students would begin with the sense that they knew the right thing to do. However, over the course of the discussion, the students would begin to realize that the issue was far more complex than they had initially thought. Perhaps they didn’t have all the information they needed. They’d begin to understand that, even though their intentions were good, there might be unintended negative consequences of acting in a particular way. Finally, they’d realize that not everyone agreed on what was the right thing to do, even though it seemed self-evident to them.

The other thing that would happen is that when a group was having this discussion, there were usually one or two who commanded everyone’s attention. These individuals were typically students who had had the most prior work experience before coming to graduate school. They were often the people who were the most articulate, the wittiest, but they were also voicing the most skeptical, if not cynical, perspectives about values and ethics. I came to notice that the message of skepticism would be the loudest. What I found was that students were walking out of the classroom feeling less empowered than when they walked in.

These were the components that were fueling my crisis of faith. I started thinking “I’m not having a positive impact here. Life is short. I want to do something that matters.”

So I decided to take a step back from this work. While taking my break from ethics and values, I started to consult with Columbia Business School. I was asked to help them find teaching and curriculum materials focusing on environmental issues and social impacts in business. There was a group of faculty members at Columbia who were focusing on ethics, and they wanted to find a way to address business ethics issues more effectively in their MBA program. Knowing my history and my past work, they asked for my input. Their work became the inspiration for Giving Voice to Values.

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At that time, Columbia Business School asked all 600 incoming MBA students to write an essay prompted by: “Tell us about a time in your work experience when you were explicitly asked, or implicitly pressured, to do something that conflicted with your own values. How did you handle it?” The school asked each student to write down their response on a single page. All responses were anonymous, and the students were asked not to identify by name the organization in their story. Columbia collected these essays and asked me to read them. Over several years I read well over a thousand. Let me share with you what I learned.

First, think about the kinds of people who go to Columbia for their MBA. Generally, they are professionals who have an average three to five years of work experience, so rarely did we see essays claiming that they had never been asked to do something that would violate their values. They all had a story to tell.

Second, Columbia is in New York City, so certain industries are more heavily represented among the MBA students. Many students came from the financial sector, a good number came from the big consulting firms and the pharmaceutical firms with headquarters in New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut. Because certain industries were more heavily represented, themes within the essays developed.

Different trends emerged. Students reported feeling pressure from employers to inflate or deflate billable hours; pressure to alter the equations or the benchmarks used to evaluate the relative attractiveness or the lack thereof of a particular financial transaction; pressure to inflate or exaggerate the capabilities of a new product. Ubiquitous human resource issues also surfaced around hiring and firing, fairness, and discrimination.

Although the scenarios they described were similar, it was interesting that their responses to these situations differed. The responses seemed to fit into one of four categories. The largest category, a little less than half of the essays, described feeling as though they had no options in terms of confronting the ethical dilemma. Second was a group who said that they were so uncomfortable with the situation that they removed themselves from it. These people got themselves transferred to a different work group or a different manager, and a few of them even quit their jobs. The third group described trying to confront the issue and failing. The last group, about a quarter of respondents, said that they confronted the issue and succeeded in making a positive change.

We thought this last group was particularly interesting. What allowed some people to be able to confront the issue and not others? These were all people who were accepted into Columbia, so they had a certain baseline of ability. My hope was that by looking for patterns and themes in the essays of the group with positive change we could use this data to become better educators and better prepare people to deal with these kinds of situations.

When I heard these stories, I remembered especially those that had the experience of rehearsing out loud what they would do in a moral conflict. They all had experience answering the question: “What would you do if…?” This experience was usually with someone they respected, someone senior to them, a boss, a teacher, a mentor, even a parent. The study showed they had the experience of literally pre-scripting and thinking through what they would say. How they would express their position.

There were two fascinating aspects to these findings: one was intellectual and cognitive and the other was experiential and behavioral. At the intellectual level, these individuals had identified the value that mattered to them. They then came up with a script to communicate what they believed. But at the experiential or behavioral level, they had literally voiced their concern, out loud, to someone more senior to them, someone who stood in as a proxy, for the kind of person they would have to communicate with in the actual circumstances. So I thought this idea was intriguing, this idea of rehearsing and practicing.

Simultaneously, we also began talking to scholars who were conducting research in different disciplines that we thought might be relevant to our project. We found a fair amount of research supporting the idea that if you want to change people’s behavior, it’s more effective to ask them to act their way into different thinking, rather than asking them to think their way into different actions. The main idea behind this research was how important practice is to changing behavior.

So, at this point in our thinking, we identified that practice is important. Yet what we typically do in a business ethics course is teach awareness and analysis. We seek to make our students aware about ethical conflicts that may arise, global and technological security issues, the changing landscape of the business world. Awareness is hugely important and necessary, but it’s not sufficient. Therefore, we also typically teach analysis. We cover the models of ethical reasoning, usually drawn from philosophy. These philosophical approaches all provide a foundation for analyzing ethical dilemmas. These models of ethical reasoning guide our students to discipline their thinking so they can think rigorously about values conflict when what’s right and wrong is not clear.

I am all for business professionals being trained to think in a complex and rigorous way, but that does not tell you how to know what is the right thing to do. And most importantly, once you’ve decided what you think is right, it does not tell you how to get it done. So that’s when we had our “aha” moment.

That’s when we knew what we needed to do. We needed to add the third ‘A.’ Awareness and analysis are important, but we also needed to teach “action.” We needed to figure out how to provide people the chance to rehearse how they will enact these values-based positions.

To develop a different pedagogy, a different teaching technique, we knew we had to move away from readings in philosophy and analyzing long case studies because those would not teach action or implementation. So we created a different kind of teaching tool. We would use very brief scenarios—sometimes just a paragraph and rarely more than three or four pages of text—that feature people at every level of the organization.

But, most importantly, these cases end with a protagonist who has already decided what he or she thinks the right thing to do is. And the question becomes: How can he or she get this done? What could they say? To whom? In what sequence? What data do they need to gather? What examples do they need to draw on, either from their firm or within one’s industry? And, then, what would the push-back be? What are the objections? Does the person have access to the person in charge? Is this an individual issue, or is this an issue that really means changing something systemic?

We compiled hundreds of pages of these cases with scenarios, teaching plans, readings, and skill building exercises. We put the entire curriculum online for free, and then we asked people to pilot what we created. Our goal was actually to create something that would be used in all classes—from accounting and marketing to economics. I knew why the educators in those disciplines didn’t want to teach ethics. It was not because they didn’t care about ethics or because they didn’t want their students to be ethically responsible. It was often because they’d think, “I was not trained as a philosopher, I was trained as an economist.” Or “this is not my area of expertise!” They didn’t want to pretend to know the right answers to all these issues.

In the end, the common thread was that at some point the people who were able to enact their values effectively in these situations spoke up.
Some faculty also didn’t know where to put a discussion on ethics in a class on marketing or accounting.

This was why we designed a new method. First of all, by using Giving Voice to Values, you won’t get into debates of philosophy. The right answer is already stated as part of the case. We have a protagonist who has decided what he or she thinks is right, and the question isn’t about intention. In addition, the arguments, the action plans, the scripts that students create can draw on the discipline of the particular class or program. So if it’s an auditing class, you are going to use the language and tools of accounting. The reality is that in the real world you are not going to go to your boss and talk about John Rawls or Aristotle. You are going to use the language of the discipline in which you work.

Our curriculum also addressed the challenge of deciding where to fit ethics into a course. Our cases are very brief. They can be introduced as a portion of a discussion, as a team project, or as a written assignment. Finally, faculty never have to preach about ethics. At its core, Giving Voice to Values is a thought experiment: What if you wanted to do what this protagonist believes is right? How could you get it done?

So Giving Voice to Values is being used in all sorts of courses, not just ethics classes. I am thrilled when I receive e-mails from accounting faculty, economics professors, faculty from operations management and international business. Even governance professors are using this approach. And now it’s being used in other disciplines as well. It’s being used across professional schools (such as engineering, nursing, medicine, and law). Increasingly, we are even being approached by companies who are looking for a more innovative and effective model of ethics training. Our approach is growing rapidly, and we are thrilled about that.

I want to conclude with three points. The reason this approach is catching on is because it reverses the traditional assumptions about how to teach ethics. We have come to think that Giving Voice to Values is about three “flips” or three reversals in how we teach and train for ethics. It changes what we are teaching, who we are teaching, and how we are teaching.

The first reversal is what we think we’re teaching. In most business ethics classes, they don’t teach the black-and-white issues, cases that have a clear-cut right and wrong. They teach the gray issues, cases where there’s a little right, a little wrong.

Most of business ethics focuses on issues where reasonable and intelligent people of good-will can legitimately disagree. We decided to focus on the clear-cut issues. By presenting short case studies where most of us would agree on the rightness or wrongness of the issue, we believe the scripting, practice, and implementation can occur. What we found is that if you get better at voicing your values when there is a clear-cut right and wrong, you are probably going to be better at talking about and acting on the gray issues too. So Giving Voice to Values shifts what issues are being discussed.

Second, we shifted who we thought we were teaching and training. Usually when I work with business schools or companies, I’ll hear something like, “Most of the people in my company, or in my class, are good, ethical people, but there are a few bad apples.” We decided to think about this assumption differently. We think of the classroom or the organization as bell-curved. At one tail-end of the bell curve are people who would self-identify themselves as opportunists: people who will try to maximize their own self-interests regardless of values. At the other end of the bell-curve are people who would self-identify themselves as idealists: people who would claim they always try to act on their values regardless of the impact on their self-interest.

This shift in audience perception operates on the premise that a majority of the people in the classroom or in an organization fall under the bell. These are folks who would self-identify themselves as pragmatists: people who would like to act on their values, as long as it doesn’t put them at a systematic disadvantage.

The opportunists will always be with us, but what we’re trying to do with Giving Voice to Values is focus on the pragmatists. We want to teach the skills, the research-based tools, the positive examples, and importantly we want to give students the opportunity to practice, to be who they already want to be. We’re not trying to change who they are, we are trying to enable them to be their best.

So Giving Voice to Values shifts who we’re training.

The last flip is how we teach. Instead of asking first and foremost “What is the right thing to do?” we ask, “Once you know what is the right thing to do, how would you get it done?” Giving Voice to Values provides the skills, the examples, the tools, and the practice to meet that challenge.

My colleagues and I like to say that one of the reasons Giving Voice to Values has been particularly attractive to students and professionals is because it’s not a “Thou Shalt Not” approach to ethics. Instead of placing constraints on action and emphasizing the things one can’t do, Giving Voice to Values has more of a “can do” approach to ethics. We strive to draw on the innovative and creative nature of people—how they can bring their organizational abilities and skills to get done what they know is the right thing to do.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share the Giving Voice to Values story. And thank you to President Harris and Dr. Schwartz for inviting me to Widener as your first Beideman Visiting Scholar.
Mary C. Gentile, PhD, is the director of *Giving Voice to Values* and a senior research scholar at Babson College, a senior advisor at the Aspen Institute Business & Society Program, and an independent consultant. Previously, Gentile was a faculty member and manager of case research at Harvard Business School. *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) is a business curriculum launched by the Aspen Institute and Yale School of Management, now based and supported at Babson College. GVV is a pioneering approach to values-driven leadership that has been featured in *Financial Times, Harvard Business Review, Stanford Social Innovation Review, McKinsey Quarterly, BizEd*, etc., and piloted in more than 550 business schools and organizations globally. Her book *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right* was published by the Yale University Press (see www.MaryGentile.com). While at Harvard Business School (1985–1995), Gentile was one of the principal architects of the educational program *Leadership, Ethics, and Corporate Responsibility*. Gentile co-authored *Can Ethics Be Taught? Perspectives, Challenges, and Approaches at Harvard Business School* (with Thomas R. Piper and Sharon Parks; Harvard Business School Press, 1993, translated into Japanese and Hungarian). Her other publications include *Differences that Work: Organizational Excellence through Diversity; Managing Diversity: Making Differences Work*; and *Managerial Excellence through Diversity: Text and Cases*, as well as numerous articles, cases, and book reviews. Gentile earned her bachelor’s degree from The College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, VA), and her MA and PhD from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

**About the Oskin Leadership Institute**

The Oskin Leadership Institute has been made possible by a generous gift from David Oskin, the former chair of Widener’s Board of Trustees, his wife, JoEllen, and their late son, David.

The mission of the Oskin Leadership Institute is to perpetuate and strengthen the university’s long and noble tradition of inspiring Widener students to be strategic leaders and responsible citizens who possess the character, courage, and competencies to affect positive change throughout the world. The *Oskin Thought Leader Series* is inspired by the late David Oskin Jr. and his love of the printed word. To learn more about the institute, please visit us at www.widener.edu/oskininstitute.