Voicing Values, Finding Answers

by Mary C. Gentile

Why do business schools find it so difficult to integrate ethics into the curriculum? Although standalone business ethics courses are unquestionably important, the topic becomes marginalized if ethics issues are not also integrated into core courses. Perhaps the subject of ethics doesn't always make it into core courses because both faculty and students are unsure whether it is really possible for people to act on their values in the workplace.

A new program—a collaboration between the Aspen Institute and the Yale School of Management—helps students learn to speak up when confronted by ethically complex situations.

For example, when accounting faculty want to integrate questions of ethics into their courses, they often address the topic of "cooking the books." They discuss the pressures employees face to engage in unethical practices, such as altering earnings reports. They emphasize the consequences of such actions and the regulatory safeguards that exist to prevent them. All the while, they might consider the whole exercise to be futile if they don't know how to teach students to handle such situations when they arise—or if they believe it would be fruitless for young managers even to bring up those issues with their employers.

This is not to say that faculty need to have all the answers about how young executives should behave if confronted with these situations. But they should believe there's a way to find the answers and that it's important to try. The distinction between not knowing the

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answers and not believing they exist is one that faculty, students, *and* managers all struggle to understand.

To help educators prepare students to speak up on ethical issues, The Aspen Institute Business & Society Program in New York City and the Yale School of Management in New Haven, Connecticut, have collaborated on a research and curriculum development initiative called Giving Voice to Values (GVV). Students hear from business practitioners who have acted on their values; they learn strategies to communicate values-based arguments in the workplace; and they develop "scripts" to help them articulate their values not only in front of their peers, but also in the real world.

A Practical Approach

Traditional ethics classes are best at illuminating students' options in situations where the ethical boundaries are unclear. The goal with GVV, on the other hand, is to help students determine a course of action when they believe they know what they *should* do but feel disempowered, unsure, or unable to find a way to act on that knowledge.

"So many students struggle with the question: How can I act on what I know is right?" says Jerry Goodstein, a professor in the department of management and operations at Washington State University-Vancouver. Goodstein notes that when students are given opportunities to explore ethical situations, drawing on their own experiences and the experiences of others, they better understand what might help or hinder their ability to voice their values. GVV helps move them "from ethical intent to ethical action," he says.

In the GVV curriculum, students and practitioners are explicitly asked, "*If* you were going to act on your values, what *would* you say or do?" To help stimulate this discussion, faculty present students with GVV case studies, then discuss sample scripts and action plans that can be used in similar situations. When GVV cases don't resolve positively, the teaching plans offer discussion questions and readings from which students can draw recommendations to alter the outcome.

For instance, the "Reporting" module shows how three managers—one senior executive, one middle manager, and one new manager fresh from his bachelor's degree—handle values conflicts linked to falsified records. In the module, the managers hear many of the common arguments in favor of such practices; students learn what they might be able to say if they're faced with similar ethical dilemmas.

Giving Voice to Values doesn't downplay the obstacles inherent in values conflicts with peers and bosses, and it doesn't deny that people tend to make rationalizations to justify their actions. Rather, the GVV program lets students know that, despite the risks and complexities of ethically challenging situations, people *can* speak up about their values and take effective action.

"GVV shifts the focus away from debates about what the 'right' answer to an ethical challenge might be and places the focus on how to act on one's values in a particular situation," says Michael C. Jensen, Jesse Isidor Straus Professor of Business Administration Emeritus at Harvard Business School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "This approach provides people the opportunity to practice handling the discomfort, threats, isolation, and embarrassment people face in such situations."

There is much to be learned from looking at how and why some people voice their values in the workplace—even when they understand the risks and acknowledge the obstacles. These individuals make a great effort to know themselves and better understand others, so they can try to avoid self-justifying rationalizations about their failure to act. They think strategically about how to implement their values, thereby diminishing the risks they face; and when the risks are unavoidable, they prepare themselves for repercussions. They also learn to communicate openly and clearly about their values, making sure they gather the information they need to make considered decisions.

The Complete Program

Seven pillars support the GVV curriculum:

One: Acknowledging shared values. Although there are quibbles about the details, research reveals that there is a short list of values that individuals generally share, regardless of their cultures, religions, or eras. While disagreements about some values are real, they need not prevent people from working together on common goals.

Two: Choosing to act. The GVV program includes a classroom exercise that helps students recognize that all individuals are capable of acting on their values, even if they have not always chosen to do so. One goal with this exercise is to debunk the idea that people are either good or bad. Another goal is to encourage students to think about factors that encourage them to act on their values—factors that are "enablers"—as well as those that discourage them, or serve as "disablers." Students learn strategies for strengthening their individual enablers and counteracting their disablers.

Students also learn that individuals are likely to grow more sure of themselves each time they speak up. One series of cases, called "Lisa Baxter—Developing a Voice," follows a woman from her earliest days as a junior strategy consultant to her current role as senior vice president of a major con-

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sumer products firm. Every time she takes a stand during her career, her actions are feasible for someone at her particular level. In the final case, she draws on all the skills and confidence she has developed as she stands up to the chairman of the board over her decision to fire a favored executive. In the debrief of the case, students examine the ten "enablers" that made it possible for her to develop a powerful voice—"enablers" that students can pursue for themselves.

Three: Normalizing values conflicts. If students expect to face values conflicts in their careers, they'll understand that these situations are a normal part of business, and they won't be disabled by surprise when conflicts arise. Instead, they'll retain their sense of competency; they'll speak up without freezing or trying to evade the problem altogether.

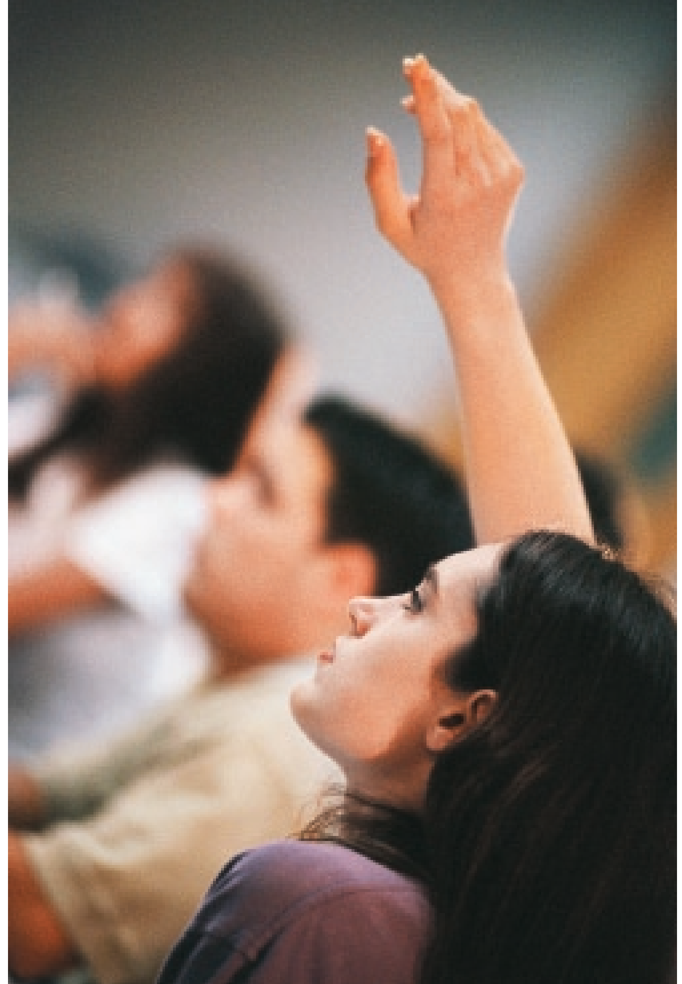
Four: Defining professional purpose. If students accept an explicitly broad definition of their purpose in doing business, they will have more leverage when they confront values conflicts. They will know that their goals aren't merely to make the next deal or please their bosses, and they can call on a wide set of arguments to make their cases.

Five: Understanding the self. Because GVV is built on the idea of appealing to students' strengths—as opposed to preaching about the need to conquer their weaknesses—the program emphasizes self-knowledge and positive alignment with personal values. The curriculum includes sample assessment tools, including one exercise called "Framing a Life Story," which helps students understand what matters to them and how they define success.

Six: Using one's voice. If they're going to speak up about values conflict in the workplace, students must first understand that there are different ways to voice their values. For instance, they can make assertions, ask questions, provide new research, try persuasion, negotiate, set examples, or identify allies. They also need to understand that various techniques work better in some circumstances than in others and that they may be more comfortable with one method over another. In addition, they need to learn that the organizational setting and the personal style of the leader could affect what approach they might take to express their values—and even the likelihood that they will speak up at all.

Most important, the GVV approach allows students to develop actual scripts and practice voicing their values in front of their peers, using the style of expression that suits them best, and then to receive coaching from their classmates. The premise is that, once they have scripted and spoken their values in the safe classroom setting, they will be more likely to speak up when necessary in the workplace.

Seven: Preparing responses. Students learn to anticipate and respond to the typical "reasons and rationalizations" that peers and bosses will give for ethically questionable behavior. One module in the GVV curriculum, "Scripts and Skills," includes a set of short cases, annotated readings about decision-making biases and framing, and teaching plans that help students script responses to frequently heard rationalizations.



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For instance, in the case called "Naïveté or Boldness?" the COO of a hospital faces a conflict with her CEO over the potential sale of the institution. She believes that the decision is based on inaccurate financial data and that the sale will negatively affect the quality of health services in the region. Her CEO, new to the organization himself and facing an inherited financial crisis, has just appointed her to this senior post, and she does not want him to question her loyalty. She suspects that if she does not get on board, she may have to leave the hospital.

The teaching plan for the case delineates many well-demonstrated decision-making biases—such as social proof, false consensus, sunk costs, overoptimism, and self-serving bias—and suggests ways for the COO to turn these to her advantage as she makes her case to the CEO. Students learn that if they understand these biases, they might be able to frame their own positions more persuasively.

All of the cases presented in the GVV curriculum are quite brief, usually three pages or less. They do not conclude by asking students what the subjects should do, as most business school cases do. Merely asking that question raises the issue of whether the subjects *should* act on their values. Instead,

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the cases present protagonists who want to act on their values and want to know how to do so. What should they say? To whom? At what time?

Although the cases are inspired by actual experiences, they are disguised. This allows students to explore not only what *did* happen, but what *could* happen, depending on their choices.

Values in the Classroom

The Giving Voice to Values curriculum and approach have been or soon will be piloted in 20 sites, and many other schools and businesses are reviewing it. One popular exercise, called "A Tale of Two Stories," has students detail two ethically challenging situations, one in which they did speak up and one in which they did not. This module has been integrated into orientation sessions at some schools, turned into a standalone workshop, integrated into core courses, and used as an elective within some MBA programs.

The unique nature of the GVV curriculum makes it easy for faculty to adapt it to a wide variety of needs. For example:

- Maureen Scully, assistant professor in management at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, teaches "issue selling in organizations" in the core MBA course called Organizational Analysis and Skills. Last year, she used the "Tale of Two Stories" exercise to get students thinking about strategic and political actions they could use in the workplace when they're trying to "sell" a values-driven position to management.

Scully says that after one student described a situation in which she did not report a coach who was sexually harassing students, the class discussed what factors had combined to keep her silent and what she could have done differently. Another student described a time he challenged company management when homophobia was affecting employees in the workplace. He actually lost his job shortly after speaking up, but he remained glad he had voiced his values.

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An international student, who had been very quiet in class until this point, told a story about the time she objected when her boss fired a middle-aged man who had just been diagnosed with cancer. Scully notes that sharing her experience during this class period seemed to be a turning point for this student, who became much more outspoken during the rest of the course.

Because the "Tale of Two Stories" exercise unfolded during the ninth week of class, says Scully, the students had already built up a level of trust with each other and wanted to tell the stories in plenary sessions rather than in small groups. She feels the impact was extraordinary. "We realized we had given students analytical tools at a structural level and managerial skills at a team level, but we hadn't given them enough tangible leadership skills at the individual level," she says. "Because GVV grounds the discussion in the students' own experiences, the session is memorable and practical." The school has since decided to incorporate the same material across all ten sections of the course.

- Last May, Minette Drumwright, associate professor at the University of Texas-Austin, also used "A Tale of Two Stories" as part of the ethics component of the EMBA program. In addition, she gave students an exercise from the "Scripts and Skills" module.

Drumwright had students consider how the new manager of a highly productive sales group could deal with unethical sales practices. Several sales managers in the class shared both the firm policies and the individual approaches that could work in such a situation. Had this topic been posed as a typical ethical dilemma, these same experienced students might have adopted a cynical "seen it all" stance. Instead, these students joined a class discussion that debated informed and sophisticated ways to handle the challenge.

Drumwright's class was so successful that she is now proposing an elective course in which EMBA students would research and write caselets about situations where people did speak up about their values. They would develop the teaching notes—and then teach the cases to the next incoming cohort of EMBA students.

- At the Yale School of Management, Ira Millstein and Anne Simpson invited the GVV initiative to develop customized cases for their corporate governance course. The cases—"The Backdating Scandal" and "The Independent Director's Challenge"—place particular emphasis on voicing dissent in the corporate boardroom, often an environment rife with strong personal loyalties and complex group dynamics.

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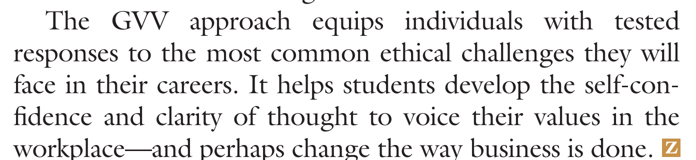
Millstein and Simpson assigned three teams to prepare scripts and action plans for each case and present them in class. As the presentations went on, students became increasingly sophisticated and more forward-thinking. Instead of simply scripting the most persuasive arguments for the values-driven position, they began to anticipate the second and third round of counter-arguments from the people they wanted to persuade, and they developed the next layers of argument and strategy. Some students even envisioned that they might not be able to prevail; at that point, they presented their conclusion that the position was still important to take because they needed to differentiate themselves from the actions of the board.

Adapting for the Future

Currently there are more than 175 pages of material available in the Giving Voice to Values curriculum. The Aspen Institute and the Yale School of Management are developing more materials, sometimes in partnership with faculty who have expertise in or a desire to teach about particular topics. Aspen and Yale also are disseminating the basic pedagogy of the approach so that faculty can use it independently in their classes. In addition, Aspen and Yale are in discussion with several faculty about designing research to examine what kind of impact this curricular approach has on students once they return to work.

At the same time, Aspen and Yale are finding opportunities to develop materials across cultures. For example, faculty from the Goa Institute of Management and the Indian School of Business are developing GVV cases and teaching plans based on India-specific situations. Aspen also recently conducted a Student Attitude Survey in China and is considering ways to use that data to develop similar methods there. Although the GVV interviews suggest many similarities across cultures, the concept of "voice" may be culturally determined, and country-specific realities may influence which approach will work best for an individual who wishes to speak up.

The Giving Voice to Values curriculum recognizes the fact that all managers encounter value conflicts in the workplace—instances when their own values conflict with what they are asked to do. It can be extremely difficult for individuals to take a stand if they feel they are in the minority, if they don't have the time to come up with a workable alternative, or if they don't want to risk presenting an incomplete response to a senior member of the organization.



The GVV approach equips individuals with tested responses to the most common ethical challenges they will face in their careers. It helps students develop the self-confidence and clarity of thought to voice their values in the workplace—and perhaps change the way business is done.

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