



MORAL MUSCLE MEMORY

True business leadership means resolving conflict without compromising core principles. Giving Voice to Values, a new approach to ethics, teaches leaders not just to identify their values but to implement them. By Mary C. Gentile

Developing values-driven leadership is not about persuading people to be more ethical. Most of us already want to act on our values, but we also want to feel we have a reasonable chance of doing so effectively and successfully. The Giving Voice to Values curriculum is raising those odds.

After several decades of business-ethics curriculum development in business schools around the world and as one of the architects of the first required course on ethics at Harvard Business School, I faced a crisis of faith. Trying to talk about and teach values-driven leadership in business both in MBA programs and in companies themselves, I began to think, was at best futile and at worst hypocritical.

Futile: at their best, these discussions would get bogged down in the challenges of leaders acting ethically when it seemed that so many, particularly in an organization, were resistant. Hypocritical: at their worst, these discussions would devolve into justifications of actions that conflict with generally held views of honesty, fairness, and integrity. As one professor termed it, we were teaching “professional rationalizations.”

And yet I didn’t believe that business professionals, or any of us, were without values or the desire to act in accordance with our authentic selves. And despite peoples’ cultural differences, scholars find that a set of core values tends to be universal; philosophers call them “hyper norms.” So why did so many of the managers, executives, students, and other professionals I spoke with say they so often felt they did not have a choice when it came to values conflicts? And why couldn’t we find a way to address this sense of powerlessness?

“Giving Voice To Values” is the new teaching technology this question led to. Instead of asking, “What is the right thing to do?” in any particular values-conflict situation, the GVV curriculum—founded and incubated with the Aspen Institute Business & Society Program along with Yale School of Management and supported by Babson College and now the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business—asks, “Once we know what we believe the right thing to do is, how can we get it done effectively?”

Rather than a traditional case study about thorny ethical dilemmas, GVV presents scenarios in which the student asks, “What if you were this protagonist who has decided what is right? How can he or she act successfully?” Instead of relegating ethical decision making to once-in-a-career tests of moral courage and character, GVV builds moral competence.

Values conflicts are a frequent part of everyday business and of everyday life. If we normalize them by applying skills we already use on a daily basis in our professional lives—problem reframing, negotiation, influence, creative problem solving—then we can expand our universe of possible options.

Recent research in social psychology, cognitive neurosciences, and linguistics teaches that if we want to have an impact on behavior, we should focus less on analysis and more on practice, literal rehearsal and pre-scripting, and peer coaching. When we confront values choices, we tend to react emotionally and even unconsciously, and then to rationalize why our actions were the right thing to do and indeed the only thing we could do. GVV interrupts the automatic response by pausing to ask, “If we intend to act ethically, how we can get it done?” The idea is to build a sort of moral muscle memory.

This approach to developing values-driven leadership is not about persuading people to be more ethical. It starts from the premise that most of us already want to act on our values, but we also want to feel we have a reasonable chance of doing so effectively and successfully. The GVV curriculum is raising those odds. Use of this approach has grown rapidly and globally, extending well beyond business education to business organizations in their ethics and leadership training; to legal and nursing and medical and engineering education; to NGOs and the military. In a world where values conflicts too often feel like impassible chasms, this approach is sorely needed.

The realities of Covid-19 are changing public conversations around the world. The fundamental reframing at the heart of Giving Voice To Values—a shift from debating whether we can or must act ethically to the collaborative discussion of how we can do so effectively—is even more relevant. I have worked with organizations to apply this methodology to questions of integrity, inclusion, harassment, and corruption. Now I hope we can work together to use it to collaborate on responses to a global challenge. ●

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