



Giving Voice to Values

How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right

by Mary C. Gentile
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Take-Aways

- Most people have a strong sense of right and wrong. They want to do the right thing, but they're afraid of negative repercussions if they speak out publicly.
- The "Giving Voice to Values" (GVV) curriculum assumes you know the right thing to do and need help alerting others to ethical dilemmas and suggesting the right actions.
- Use the 12 core assumptions of GVV to implement "values-driven action." They include drawing from your experience and realizing you have support.
- The Giving Voice to Values strategy relies on seven pillars of action: First, distinguish among ethics, morals and values.
- Second, use "enablers," like your friends, to support your value-based actions.
- Third, to approach a values-based dilemma calmly, see it as a normal part of business.
- Fourth, to align with your firm's purpose, be clear about your own purpose.
- Fifth, to prepare to speak up on a values issue, know your style, strengths, limits and preferences so you can formulate them into useful tools.
- Sixth, prepare a script so you say what you intend to say as you mean to say it.
- Seventh, prepare to deal with people's rationalizations.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Applicability

9

Innovation

8

Style

7

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) What values are, what they are not and how they differ from ethics and morals; 2) How to recognize and assess values-based conflicts in your workplace; and 3) How and when to use various tools to speak up and act on your values.

Recommendation

Most people know the difference between right and wrong, but far fewer have the courage to act on their convictions when the stakes seem high, especially in the workplace. Babson College researcher Mary C. Gentile lucidly outlines and discusses the fundamentals of the “Giving Voice to Values” (GVV) curriculum she launched at the Aspen Institute in conjunction with Yale University. This ethics-based course of study is now part of more than 140 college-level business education programs worldwide. If you’ve ever kept silent despite your better judgment, GVV strategies can help you develop the skills and tools you need to speak up and take action. Gentile provides examples of how real people have dealt with complex values-based issues in corporate settings and offers a robust menu of self-assessment exercises to illuminate the discourse. *getAbstract* believes anyone in the workforce at any level will find great value in this approach to living and working in accord with your principles.

Summary

The Underlying Premise of “Giving Voice to Values”

Across cultures, most people feel a strong sense of right and wrong. When facing an ethical dilemma, they generally want to do the right thing. Yet they often fail to follow through for fear of negative repercussions, especially at work. Perhaps you chose an unethical path in a past situation, but you’ve made better choices other times, so you know you can act on your values.

Most management schools’ ethics classes focus on various models of logical thinking that can help you make an informed choice about the right course of action. However, these courses often fail to teach you how to implement your decisions. The Giving Voice to Values (GVV) curriculum differs from standard ethics classes because it assumes that you already know the right thing to do and that now you need help with the next step – transforming your intent into appropriate, effective action. GVV’s ultimate goal is to enable people to make positive change inside organizations by using “problem definition, creative problem solving, constructive engagement, persuasion, reasoning, personal example and leadership.”

“The Thought Experiment”

Eastern philosophies say to go with the flow of your energy and not fight it. Adopting that attitude will help you act on your ethics. First, open your mind, if only temporarily, to the 12 core assumptions behind GVV’s tactics for “values-driven action”:

1. You want to “voice and act upon” your values.
2. You have voiced your values in the past.
3. You can voice them “more often and more effectively.”
4. Some situations lend themselves to voicing your values more easily than others.

“Many of the thorniest issues we face in our lives are less about right versus wrong than about right versus right.”

“The power and effectiveness of our efforts to voice and act on our values are often driven by the power and persuasiveness of the stories we tell about them.”

"If you were going to act on your values, what would you say and do?"

Giving Voice to Values lets you "practice handling the discomfort, threats, isolation and embarrassment people face in such situations."

"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."

"Voicing our values can become a muscle or a habit – more of an automatic or default choice. The more we do it, the more we will do it."

5. You're likelier to act on your values if you practice in advance.
6. The example you set by voicing your values holds great power.
7. Acting on your principles empowers others to do the same. You may never know who.
8. The more aware you are of your values, the better you can leverage your strengths and minimize the effects of your limitations.
9. You are not alone; you have more support than you realize.
10. Standing up for your values is always worthwhile, whether you prevail or not.
11. Voicing your values leads to better decision making.
12. The more you think you can act on and speak of your values, the more likely it becomes that you will keep doing so.

With these assumptions in place, consider how GVV's "seven pillars" can work for you:

Pillar 1: How Values Differ from Ethics and Morals

Values, ethics and morals are three clearly different concepts. Ethics are rule-based, externally imposed standards, like those stated in the compliance-oriented framework of "business ethics, medical ethics, legal ethics or...professional ethics." Invoking ethics normally calls for examining a situation in light of known models that justify or punish whatever has happened. Studying ethics helps you assess appropriate right-wrong responses, but it doesn't give you advice or clarity on implementing those choices.

Morals also take a stand on a behavior's "rightness or wrongness," but without regard to how you might feel about the behavior or the reasons behind it. Like ethics, morals emphasize judgment and discipline more than positive action. Values are attributes all cultures widely share. Ethicist Rushworth Kidder lists "honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion" as examples. Keeping your list of values short will make it easier to implement values-driven action. You want to align yourself positively with your highest goals and deepest sense of self, rather than moving against your inner feelings by acting with stern judgment or coercion.

Pillar 2: "The Power of Choice"

You know you can speak and act on your values because you have done so before and you have seen other people make similar choices. To gain insight into your previous choices and to align your values-driven actions with your true self, try a "self-reflection" exercise called "A Tale of Two Stories." This simple, but not easy, exercise will unmask realities and defuse myths. It offers "strategic and tactical, cognitive and emotional" lessons.

First, think of a previous workplace situation where you spoke out and acted on your values. Then, think of a time when you didn't. For each story, ask yourself: How did you act – or not act – and what was the impact? What drove you to speak and act or to remain quiet and inactive? Looking back, are you "satisfied" with your reaction or not, and how would you rather feel? Would any factor you could control – or any you couldn't – have made speaking and acting easier? Factors that could boost your ability and willingness to act on your values are "enablers." Their opposites – or their absence – are "disablers." Useful enablers include:

- **Having allies** – Draw on co-workers, friends, family members, attorneys or experts.
- **Selecting and sequencing audiences** – The first person you talk to matters a lot.
- **Gathering information** – Do your homework before speaking your mind.
- **Asking questions first** – Open an interactive discussion before offering answers.

“The search for an unassailable argument can be the enemy of success. It becomes more important to normalize the act of expressing our values, and we can do this via practice.”

“Our choices come with no guarantees, and that is also true of our choice to voice and act on our values.”

“Explicitly naming our managerial and professional purposes gives us a broader platform to stand on when voicing our values.”

“To create and preserve ethical organizational cultures, not everyone has to voice and enact our deepest shared values – just enough of us do.”

- **Knowing your audience** – Be sensitive to others’ “needs, fears and motivations.”
- **Taking incremental steps** – Acting on larger issues takes more steps and more time.
- **Framing the issue** – Cast your solution to an unpleasant situation as a win-win proposition for everyone.

Pillar 3: “It’s Only Normal”

Being faced with an ethical choice often surprises working people, no matter where they’re positioned in the corporate hierarchy. They don’t realize that such occurrences are common in business, so they see any ethical dilemma as out of the ordinary and imbue it with too much angst. To act non-emotionally on something you know is right, reframe the issue as a “regular and predictable” part of your job, profession or industry. Prepare to handle such matters by creating and rehearsing a “script” that communicates your beliefs. Craft this response as a natural way to extend your values, so you can speak up without blaming those with whom you disagree. Identify the ethical dilemmas you face – or might face – in your job. Reframe them as group problems, not just your problem. Develop a script with ideas and language you can use with your boss, peers or employees to say “let’s try” to do better rather than implying “thou shalt not.” Honor everyone’s stake in the issue, not just your own.

Pillar 4: “What Am I Working For?”

Long before you find yourself in a values-based dilemma, work to understand and express your specific individual and career goals and purpose. Never let your wish to stay in the good graces of the superiors who review your performance limit your options for speaking and acting. Do your job according to company rules, but understand that these regulations don’t inform your purpose or your firm’s mission. Identify your company’s sense of purpose to find overarching “positive principles and goals” that you hold in common with your boss. Let them guide your response when values are at stake.

Economist Robert Frank says that to achieve workplace fairness, companies should institute even-handed processes instead of issuing “outcomes-only directives.” An environment of fairness creates a platform for mutual respect that manifests as an atmosphere of dignity when discord occurs. Having a sense of purpose and shared values in your firm may not simplify your response to ethical dilemmas, but it will elevate your participation when situations emerge. Reframe value-based conflicts as opportunities to help safeguard and perpetuate your organization.

Pillar 5: Exploit Your Strengths: “Self-Knowledge, Self-Image and Alignment”

Writers and actors often create backstories to define and give depth and dimension to their characters. Similarly, you should examine your history and generate a “self-story” that captures the truth of your experiences, beliefs and goals. This will help you have the courage to voice and act on your values. This also will help you structure a self-image framework that will support you in the future when you make the choice to speak up and take action based on your values. The traits that emerge as you construct your profile might not directly connect with your values, but they should reflect your general behavior. It doesn’t matter whether you consider yourself to be, for example, risk-tolerant or risk-averse, more contrarian or more agreeable. However, it does matter that you know your style, strengths, limits and preferences so you can formulate them into useful tools. Explore five areas of personal knowledge: stating your purpose, understanding your tolerance of risk, communicating in a genuine way, defining who or what deserves your loyalty, and developing a strong self-image.

“Instead of normalizing the loss of our values, we can normalize the fact that we will be called upon to preserve them in the face of predictable challenge.”

“Reframing ‘voice’ as ‘dialogue,’ which includes a goodly dollop of ‘listening,’ is another important piece of the recipe.”

“Voicing and acting on your values is a learnable skill.”

“The pivotal moment was deciding to speak.”

Pillar 6: How to Find Your Voice

Knowing your values is one thing; knowing how and when to express them is another. To speak up appropriately and effectively, either draw from your past experiences in comparable situations or examine your current predicament to evolve a new script you can use with confidence and clarity. Consider four basic elements:

1. **How you speak up and act matters** – To express yourself well, do your homework, know your audience and know the circumstances. Frame your opinion respectfully. For genuine influence in proving your point, be willing to listen to the other side.
2. **Choose a comfortable approach** – Frame your presentation in a way that meshes with your natural style of personal interaction. This is a critical factor in deciding to speak up.
3. **Organizational context matters** – Certain corporate cultures and certain kinds of leaders and leadership styles are more conducive to expressing personal values than others, especially if speaking out runs counter to the “prevailing winds.”
4. **Improve your odds of success** – Seek expert advice from someone who can help you organize your thoughts. Practice what you want to say and use that feedback to boost your confidence about doing what you know to be right.

Pillar 7: “Reasons and Rationalizations”

Other people will offer implicit or assumed explanations to justify actions that seem wrong. Their rationales during values-based conflicts will affect your potential response. You might suffer from a “nagging doubt” that makes you feel uneasy day after day, or you might be caught in the middle of a breach of ethics that challenges your loyalty to your company’s best interests and your own. Rushworth Kidder sorts such ethical conflicts into four generic types of dilemmas: “truth versus loyalty,” “individual versus community,” “short term versus long term” and “justice versus mercy.” Identify and prepare for ethical challenges that arise commonly in your field, such as the potential for conflicts of interest that often plague the finance sector. Preparation will give you the tools you need. For instance, take steps now to be ready if someone claims that everybody does things in a fraudulent way, or that breaking a certain rule doesn’t really hurt anybody, or that somebody else said to commit a particular misdeed.

“Putting It to Work”

Beyond understanding and practicing the seven pillars of Giving Voice to Values, remember the following:

- Your arguments don’t have to be “entirely unassailable and perfect.”
- Sometimes your gut response is the best tactic, but stay alert to unexpected arguments.
- Even if you feel as if you must use your voice “now or never,” you always can find ways to stall for time – even if just a few minutes – to prepare an unpressured response.
- People find courage in their own ways. Self-knowledge is the best motivator of inspired action.

About the Author

Mary C. Gentile, who holds her PhD in humanities, directs the Giving Voice to Values curriculum at Babson College, where she is a senior research scholar. Previously, she taught for 10 years at Harvard Business School.