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Mary C. Gentile: Giving Voice to Values: Enabling People to Act Ethically

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Abstract

Business schools have been teaching business ethics in one form or another for decades, yet the continuation of corporate scandals seems to point to the futility of these efforts. The question as to whether business schools can truly mould the ethical inclination of students remains paramount. Many educators who believe that schools can affect change in this area have called for a rethinking of how business ethics is taught. A pedagogy and a curriculum that focuses on developing people's capacities to act on their ethical values effectively in any setting, Giving Voice to Values provides a different approach to the ethical analysis methodology traditionally employed in business ethics classrooms.

Business programs have incorporated and taught ethics subjects for the past 40 years (Welch, 2017). However, the series of corporate scandals that have marked business' recent history (from the 2001 Enron accounting fraud, to the 2015 Volkswagen emission scandal, to the 2017 Wells Fargo scandal where employees created 3.5 million fraudulemt bank and credit card accounts) seemingly points to the futility of these ethical programs as taught in business schools. As Varma (2019) puts it, "the real concern is whether ethics education makes a difference in the way individuals make ethical decisions in the workplace" (p. 108).

The discussion around this issue includes many factors, such as whether business schools can affect the ethical inclination of students (Saat, Porter, & Woodbine, 2010). Among the scholars who believe that business schools can mould the ethical attitudes and behaviors of their students, many call for the rethinking of how business ethics is taught (Swanson & Fisher, 2008).

Giving Voice to Values (GVV) is a pedagogy and a curriculum that focuses on developing the capacities of people to act on their ethical values effectively in any setting. This was pioneered by Dr. Mary C. Gentile, Professor of practice, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, USA and educational consultant, who was earlier at Harvard Business School. Among numerous honours, Gentile was named a "Top Mind 2017" by Compliance Weekly.

At the heart of GVV is the assumption that most people are ethical and that they desire to act ethically. However, the translation of this desire to action has been pointed out as the missing link. This missing link is where GVV comes in. In contrast to the focus on ethical awareness, analysis of scenario-based case studies and work assignments, GVV is focused on ethical action. This focus is demonstrated by the fact that GVV asks the questions "What if I were going to act

on my values? What would I say and do? How could I be most effective?" ("Giving Voices to Values," 2020).

SVJ: Your GVV approach resonates with many people. May we know what personal experience inspired you to think of this approach?

MCG: Thank you for the opportunity to share Giving Voice To Values with you and your readers.

Yes, Giving Voice To Values and its innovative methodology for values-driven leadership development was driven by many personal experiences as well as by broader trends in scholarship and research.

I have spent much of my professional career working in business education, with a particular emphasis on ethics education as well as diversity and inclusion. While at Harvard Business School back in the '90s, I was part of the team that developed their first required curriculum on values-driven leadership and ethical decision making. I also shared this work with educators and practitioners at other educational institutions and companies and saw what was being taught in these settings. And after working in this arena for several decades, I became discouraged and disillusioned. I began to fear that my efforts to teach about ethics and values in business were at best, futile and at worst, hypocritical.

Many experiences triggered this discouragement, but the primary driver was what I saw in business ethics classrooms at many schools and in corporate training sessions. It seemed that the typical approach we took was to share scenarios – case studies about some thorny ethical problem – and we would ask participants to read the case and come prepared to discuss it. Learners would typically go into the discussion with an idea about what they thought the right and ethical thing to do might be, but in the course of the discussion, two things would happen. First, their thinking would become more complex. They would realize that they might not have all the information or perhaps that the behavior being examined was all too common. Or they would worry that even though their concern was warranted, they might not be able to see a clear or even feasible path to taking effective action. I think that this outcome – witnessing the complexity of the situation – is a good thing. We don't want practitioners to be naïve about the ethical challenges they may face.

But the second thing that would happen in these conversations was more troubling to me. Perhaps you may have had a similar experience. I would find that in any particular classroom or particular organizational training group, there would typically be a couple of people whom the other participants all tended to respect and listen to. In corporate settings, they were often the most senior persons in the room. In different settings, they might be the most articulate, the individuals who always had a witty story to illustrate their point or who could present a complex idea in a clear and compelling and pithy manner. But whatever the reason, it often seemed that these folks – the ones that everyone tended to listen to – were the ones who were offering the most sceptical if not cynical responses to the ethical challenges at hand. That is, the most

influential participants were the ones who said something like: “I know what you want me to say, Mary, but in the real world, this just is not possible.”

So I was concerned that learners were walking out of these ethics and values discussions both more confused and less empowered, and that was certainly not the outcome I was interested in. It was this experience that led me to step back from what I was doing. This experience led me to search for a different way to teach and train and to talk about ethics and values in our organizations and our wider lives.

SVJ: Was there any inspiration from different authors or literature that sparked this approach?

MCG: Yes, in addition to the personal frustration I described above, about a dozen years ago, I also started to become aware of scholarship that supported a new and different approach to values-driven leadership development. There was beginning to be thinking in a variety of disciplines that suggested that pre-scripting, rehearsal, and peer coaching might be effective ways to have an impact on behavior.

In psychology, there was research, for example, on the idea of habit formation. And some scholars study “Positive Deviance” – that is, they study individuals who deviate from the “norm,” in a positive direction. And research in Behavioral Ethics emphasized the idea of re-wiring the emotional and semi-automatic responses we have to values conflicts. And cognitive neuroscience research demonstrated the ideas of brain plasticity and the creation of new neural pathways. All of these studies suggested to me that there could be power in the ideas of pre-scripting and rehearsal.

The story I like to tell to make these ideas more tangible has to do with the study of kinesthetics – or the study of physical movement. Years ago, I decided to take a self-defense course, and I decided on a program called “Model Mugging.” The instructors took a developmental approach, teaching us all the physical defense moves and asking us to practice them in the air; these were moves like a fist to bridge of nose or heel to instep or knee to groin. And then once we knew the defensive movements, they would bring in a gentleman in a padded suit on whom we could practice these moves, full force because he was protected. At first, it felt a bit ludicrous because we would stand in line, waiting for our turn to be attacked. But as the weeks went by, this gentleman would begin to attack us when we least expected it. We never knew what hold he would use or when he would attempt it. It was nerve-wracking, but the instructors explained to us that this approach was based on research on “specific state muscle memory.” That is, if you rehearse something in the same physical and cognitive and emotional states that you will be in when you need to use it, the idea is that at that moment, even if you freeze, your body will remember. So athletes practice their movements over and over, so when they are in actual competitions, under all that stress, their bodies will remember and naturally take the proper form.

So one day in this class, when I was on the floor having failed to defend myself adequately, I began to wonder if we could create a “MORAL muscle memory”? That is, a default to Voice – but not just to speaking up but rather a default to INFORMED voice because I was gathering stories of times when individuals had successfully voiced and enacted their values. I was finding

that it was often less an instance of "blowing the whistle" or accusing someone of misbehavior. It was more an instance of someone using all their communication and influence skills to re-frame the challenges and address the objections they might face and offering alternative pathways forward. So it was these ideas of pre-scripting, rehearsal and peer coaching - triggered by a variety of research streams - that also laid the foundation for GVV.

SVJ: Why do you think that so many people appreciate this approach?

MCG: I think that GVV is accessible and powerful and at its heart, the idea makes sense to people. That is, GVV starts from the premise that many of us (not all but perhaps most) would like to behave in alignment with our values, but often we don't believe it is possible to do so without putting ourselves at risk, often with small hope of success. We would like to think we have a reasonable chance of doing so effectively and successfully. The GVV pedagogy and curriculum are about raising those odds.

So GVV is less about "thou shalt not's" or constraints on action, and more about a "Can Do" approach, even an entrepreneurial approach to values and ethics. It is about expanding our capacity rather than narrowing our options. It is about action – building the skills, confidence and habit of values-driven leadership – rather than about rules and philosophical debate. Rather than a focus on ethical *analysis*, the *Giving Voice to Values* (*GVV*) curriculum focuses on ethical *implementation* and asks the question: "What if I were going to act on my values? What would I say and do? How could I be most effective?" It is driven from a place of aspiration – our values and ideas about the kind of person we want to be, as opposed to being driven from a place of rules and limitations imposed from outside ourselves. And most of all, it is about CHOICE -- helping individuals to see that they often have more options than they may have thought they did.

SVJ: As GVV gathered momentum and gained popularity, what were some of the unexpected insights that participants have shared with you as they adopt this practice? What new things did you learn in your work in this field?

MCG: Well, first of all, I have been amazed – very pleasantly so – at the breadth of its appeal. I have learned that it is useful and compelling across geographical and cultural differences because it starts from a place of respect and acknowledgement of reality.

We recognize that contexts are different. But we also know that although different contexts may make it more challenging to act on some values-based positions than others, that does not mean that individuals in these different regions or cultures do not have values and want to act on them. It's just that the prevailing winds and the local norms may mean that they need to take different steps to do so. We always try to find and share positive examples of individuals acting successfully on their values from within the culture or region or industry where we are working. These examples can trigger both a sense of pride and confidence in the possibility of success as well as a competitive spirit: if he or she can do it, we can do it!

I have also learned that although I cannot possibly know or fully understand all the challenges one may face in a particular part of the world or a particular profession (e.g., business, law, healthcare, the military, etc.) or in a particular function (finance or marketing or corporate governance, and so on), there is enormous power in asking the NEW QUESTION – the GVV question – which is not "WHETHER I can act on my values in a particular situation?" but instead "HOW can I act – effectively – on my values in this situation?"

SVJ: Have there been empirical studies that perhaps support how effective GVV is? Can it actually lead to creating future ethical leaders (from amongst students)?

MCG: I often get questions about evidence for the impact of the GVV curriculum/pedagogy as I travel around the world sharing the approach. There are starting to be scholars who are researching the impact of their use of GVV but in the meantime, I tend to respond with reference to 4 "levels" of support as follows:

Level 1) Empirical evidence: As noted above, the GVV approach was developed based on research in several fields that suggested that "rehearsal" or practice was an effective way to influence behavior: for example, social psychology (positive deviance); cognitive neuroscience (Damasio); kinesthetics ('specific state muscle memory"); etc.

Level 2) Anecdotal evidence: For example, as faculty and companies use this curriculum, I receive reports of folks who say they tried the approach and found it effective.

Level 3) Pre/Post survey: Some faculty do pre/post surveys of their students. In particular, there is a professor in Australia (Bond University) who has done a nice job of designing and describing the results of this type of survey.

Level 4) The "holy grail": The "holy grail" of such research would be the longitudinal study that shows that the person exposed to GVV training, years later, found a way to voice/enact their values effectively. I am not sure it is possible to design such a study for all the reasons you are aware of. At best, it seems one might find "correlative" connections (as opposed to "causal"), given all the intervening and ancillary inputs.

It is notoriously difficult to design such research, just as it is for other so-called "soft skills" -- leadership, diversity management, etc. Moreover, I think that I view this work and the evaluation somewhat differently. I don't see GVV as about changing folks who are "unethical" into "ethical" folks. Instead, I tend to think of the audience as a bell curve (based on scholarship by Greg Dees and Peter Cramption), where at one tail end are the "Opportunists" – individuals who say that their primary motivation is self-interest, regardless of values. (No one falls into one of these categories all the time, but these are the folks who self-identify in this way.) At the other tail, are the folks who self-identify as "Idealists," saying that they will always try to act on their values regardless of self-interest. We premise that the majority of us fall under the bell – I put myself there – and they self-identify as "Pragmatists", saying that we would like to act on our values as long as it does not put us at a systematic disadvantage. That is not to say that we are certain we will succeed or that we know we will never pay a price, but instead that we think we

have a chance of being effective. Seen this way, GVV offers the skills, the scripts, the rehearsal and the positive examples to help individuals to be whom they ALREADY want to be, at their best. And framed this way, even though the target audience is not the so-called "opportunists", the focus is to impact the "pragmatists" and the "idealists", thereby changing the waters in which the opportunists are swimming. Hopefully, this also alters their calculus for what is most likely to be effective, even for their objectives. They can no longer rely on silent complicity from the others.

SVJ: What advice would you give to faculty members who wish to champion the GVV approach to teaching ethics?

MCG: Help them to see that the GVV approach does not ask them to be philosophers or to preach to their students. Instead, GVV presents realistic challenges relevant to the discipline of function that they already teach. The GVV exercise of creating scripts and action plans and re-framing the problem definitions requires the students to apply the very vocabulary, analytics, tools and frameworks of the discipline they are teaching. It is not a "stepping away" from their focus on Accounting or Finance or Marketing but rather a deepening of it. And I would also be happy to introduce them to the faculty in these various disciplines who are using this approach effectively.

SVJ: How about those faculty who would want to adapt the GVV approach and get the buy-in of co-faculty?

MCG: I would let them know about the widespread use of the approach, all over the world and not only across disciplines in business but other professions and in corporations and NGOs and so on.

Also, there are numerous videos, a MOOC from Coursera, a series of interactive modules from Nomadic.fm and hundreds of pieces of curricular materials – cases, teaching notes, exercises, readings – available to them, as well as articles written by other faculty about their positive experiences with this work and a GVV Book Series from Routledge Publishing. And I spend most of my time sharing the approach with interested faculty and corporate practitioners who want to apply it. Just send me an email! (By the way, much of this material is available for free.)

SVJ: What advice would you give faculties teaching different levels (senior high schools, undergrads, and master level) in the process of adapting GVV? Are there important nuances to adapting it to these different levels?

MCG: GVV has been used at all these levels and is easily adapted. The fundamental GVV Exercise – "A Tale of Two Stories" – has been adapted for use with different levels and audiences and can serve as a great source of GVV scenarios specific to the group at hand.

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