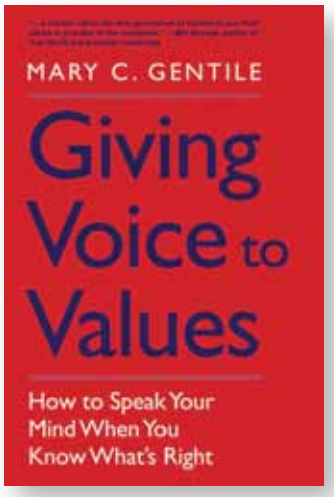
Doing the Right Thing When It Is Hard

Living Your Ethics in Tough Situations

By Shayne Kavanagh



Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right

Mary C. Gentile
Yale University Press 2010
320 pages, $19

Knowing the right thing to do is usually not that hard, but doing the right thing in the face of pressure to do the wrong thing or at least look the other way can be very hard. In fact, ethical tragedies are often the result of people who sit silently on the sidelines, afraid or uncertain of what to do about a transgression. This is the premise of the book *Giving Voice to Values* by Mary Gentile, a professor at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business and creator/director of "Giving Voice To Values," an innovative approach to values-driven leadership development.

Most of the ethical guidance that public finance officers encounter comes in the form of ethical analysis, or distinguishing right from wrong. But Gentile believes that in many of the most common situations, most people already can distinguish between right from wrong, so what is needed to make ethical behavior more common is to help people act on the knowledge they already have. In fact, Gentile posits, most people want to live in accordance with their values and have successfully voiced their values in their lives at some point. This is a good starting point for helping people voice their values more often and more effectively.

Giving Voice to Values has seven foundational concepts: values; choice; normality; purpose; self-knowledge, self-image, and alignment; voice; and reasons and rationalizations.

VALUES

Values are different from ethics. Ethics imply a set of rules that are provided by an outside entity and that you are expected to comply with. In contrast, values come from within. If the goal is to do the right thing, we will find moving with our highest aspirations and sense of self (i.e., values) easier than attempting to merely comply with an outside set of rules (ethics). Gentile encourages us to reflect on what our values are, suggesting that there will probably be a fair amount of convergence among people regarding key values. For example, cross-cultural studies have suggested values like honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion are widely shared. GFOA's own research suggests that values related to trustworthiness are important among GFOA members.

Besides finding your own moral footing, you can appeal to values like those described above when making your case for a particular course of action. For instance, if a colleague in the finance department advocates for behavior that you consider questionable, you might appeal to the need for you both to maintain your trustworthiness as an argument against this course. Not everyone will share all of your values, so we shouldn't assume too much, but appealing to the core values that most people will agree with (as opposed to framing our positions in terms that are more specific to our

individual style or preferences) will increase your chances of success when you need to give them voice. The success of this conversation is often more about how we frame and communicate our positions than about simply deciding what is right.

CHOICE

In her research, Gentile has often found that people who acted in an unethical manner did so because they thought they "didn't have a choice," but she believes we actually have a wider range of choice than we might think. A common psychological phenomena called "narrow framing" causes us to focus on the information right in front of us and to ignore other options and possibilities. What this means is that we need ways to help us see other options.

One way to do this is to create a network of allies before you need to respond to a values conflict. For example, some governments have developed explicit values statements that they promote in meaningful ways (e.g., making them integral to the employee orientation and performance management program). This would help make employees more comfortable with discussing the values and bringing them up. A finance department could even articulate values that are important to finance in particular as way of creating a support network; using the language of finance would make this feel more relevant and realistic to practitioners. With a support network in place, we might not feel trapped into going along with questionable behavior.

Another strategy is to practice communication skills. If you can communicate effectively, you have more options for responding to conflicts. This does not mean you need to become skilled at improvising ethical arguments. Rather, Gentile found that people who successfully voiced their values planned and scripted their responses. Further, they often looked for the right moment and the right context to make their cases and prepared themselves with the appropriate data and examples.

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You can also give yourself room to maneuver by posing questions to others rather than making arguments; sincere questions may prompt them to reconsider their views. To illustrate, you might ask someone to explain why they think their proposed course of action is the best option, what the risks are, and what the consequences are if things go wrong. Even if your colleagues don't change their minds on their own, you can uncover their underlying motivations — information you'll need to refine how you communicate with them.

Gentile believes that the most powerful strategy to open up a conversation is framing. For instance, imagine your colleagues want to pursue an "opportunity" of questionable legality. This could be re-framed as "a risk we all want to avoid." Another example is when someone characterizes ethically challenged behavior as "common" or "acceptable." In this case, you could offer evidence that the ethical alternative is, in fact, more common or widely supported.

NORMALITY

Values conflicts happen. If we accept this, we can prepare for it and avoid overreacting, which can lead to hasty or ill-considered actions or to describing the conflict in apocalyptic terms, all of which reduce the odds of a successful outcome. Overly emotional responses can also lead to a "deer-in-headlights" reaction, where we limit our own options and fail to access the communication and reasoning skills that we already possess, thereby limiting our effectiveness. Normalizing and accepting the potential for values conflicts recognizes that we all have different points of view and sometimes conflict will occur. That conflict can be either destructive or constructive, depending on how we approach it.

Of course, not all values conflicts will have a fairytale ending. If we recognize this ahead of time, we should be prepared to exit the organization and/or make sure that the appropriate audiences are aware of the problems if we can't find a good solution to a values conflict. We can all take practical steps to make this step easier, such as maintaining professional networks and keeping enough aside in personal financial reserves so we can weather a period of unemployment.

PURPOSE

We find it easier to voice our values we feel empowered by an ennobling purpose, rather than feeling that we are just responding to set of moral constraints. For example, a public finance officer might think about maintaining the trust that public has bestowed upon

him or her as keeper of the community's shared financial resources. This purpose suggests a series of positive, uplifting goals — goals that other people may wish to help you with.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE, SELF-IMAGE, AND ALIGNMENT

We all have strengths and weaknesses, and a wide array of research suggests that we are happier and more successful when we know our strengths and accentuate them. For example, if you are pragmatic, you might excel at recognizing what others are trying to achieve with a proposed course of action and help develop an alternative that achieves that goal while honoring the values you are championing.

Gentile suggests creating a "self-story" that is consistent with our strengths to help create a mental image of ourselves that we want to maintain, making it easier for us to voice our values. For example, if you see yourself as someone who is courageous, you'd want to live up to that self-image by addressing a potentially risky values conflict head on. If you see yourself as a pragmatic person, you might be more likely to make a reasoned case for ethical behavior rather than losing your cool.

When self-knowledge and self-image are aligned, you have a powerful basis for action.

VOICE

There are many ways to voice our values, including assertion, questioning, researching and presenting data, negotiating, leading by example, and recruiting allies. We need to find the methods we are most skilled in and comfortable with so we can gain confidence in our ability to voice our values.

Context matters because some methods of voice will be more successful than others in certain situations. Being a good listener will help you better understand the context and thereby pick the best technique. Earlier, we mentioned framing and re-framing as a powerful strategy for opening up a conversation. Framing is also an important skill is because it can help you adjust the context to one that is more suitable for your favored techniques. For example, perhaps if you are not a skilled emotional communicator, you might be able to reframe to bring more reason into the discussion (or vice versa).

Like any skill, the ability to give voice to values improves with practice. Therefore, Gentile advocates deliberately practicing your delivery, including scripting out what you want to say during a values conflict, delivering it to a supportive peer, and getting coaching from your peers or a mentor.

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REASONS AND RATIONALIZATIONS

The perpetrators of unethical behavior typically have rationalizations for what they are doing. Part of giving voice to values is recognizing these rationalizations and countering them. These counterpoints don't necessarily come in the form of ethical arguments *against* the course of action in question. By recognizing what's at stake for your colleagues, you can craft a persuasive response — one is *in favor* of the shared values held by you and your audience.

Eventually, you will become skilled at recognizing rationalizations because people typically use just a few of them. This allows you to more easily bring the rationalization to the surface, discuss it, and counter it. Here are some examples:

- **Expected or Standard Practice.** "Everyone does this, so it's really standard practice. It's expected."
- **Materiality.** "The impact of this action is not material. It doesn't really hurt anyone."
- **Locus of Responsibility.** "This is not my responsibility; I'm just following orders here."
- Locus of Loyalty. "I know this isn't quite fair to citizens, but I don't want to hurt my staff/boss/agency."

To counter the "standard practice" rationalization, you might point out that if everyone were doing it and it where widely accepted, then there wouldn't be prohibitions or advisories against doing it. Or, you could point out examples where the behavior hasn't occurred or where the opposite behavior is common. Once these counteracting strategies are part of your repertoire, you can use them repeatedly.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, *Giving Voice to Values* closes with lessons about how to put these seven foundations into operation, drawn from Gentile's research and direct experience instructing people in this method:

1. Arguments in Favor of Values do Not Have to Be Perfect. Often, we fail to voice our values because there appear to be good reasons not to. But if you take some time to critically analyze those reasons, you will often see that they aren't as strong as they first appeared and that your reasoning compares favorably.

2. Consider the Risks of Not Voicing Your Values. We often let the risks of speaking up stop us from doing it, but there are severe risks to letting ethical behavior go unchecked.

3. The Best Argument May Be the Most Unconventional One. The expected response to an ethical dilemma is often righteous indignation, which probably won't get you very far. More persuasive approaches that look for constructive solutions may be more effective.

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4. Buy Time for a Response. In many situations, you don't have to respond immediately to a values conflict. Take time to formulate your best response — just because you may have failed to respond when a problematic idea first surfaced, it is not necessarily too late to do so afterward.

5. Access Your Source of "Moral Competence." Someone who voices their values doesn't necessarily have to see themselves as a bold risk-taker. A cautious or fearful person may find the will to voice their values out of concern of what might happen if they don't.

GFOA is working with Mary Gentile to bring her approach into public finance. We'll provide updates on this project.

Note

1. Read more at Gentile's websites, GivingVoiceToValues.org and GivingVoiceToValuesTheBook.com.

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