

Giving Voice to Values

■ BY MARY C. GENTILE, PhD

Based on a presentation to the GFOA membership

The whole idea behind the book *Giving Voice to Values* is explained by the subtitle: *How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*. This approach grew out of my sense of frustration and disillusionment with educational and organizational training for ethics and values-driven leadership, whether it was in universities, businesses, or the public sector. We tended to approach values-related issues and ethical issues as if the process were entirely cognitive, as if it were entirely a matter of analysis—that you would be given a situation and then you had to figure out the right answer to this ethical dilemma.

The focus was on decision-making rather than an implementation, which I'd characterize as "rules and not tools," or "preach and pretend." We'll preach to you what's right; we'll give you a code and then we'll pretend you can do it, or that you know how to do it, or that you feel comfortable and confident doing it, or that you'll be able to do it in a way where you don't end up getting penalized or feeling that it just is going to be futile.

Around that time—this was about 10 or 12 years ago—I started to see a lot of new research, in a variety of disciplines. And it all suggested that to have an impact on people's behavior, you needed to approach these issues through rehearsal, pre-scripting, peer coaching, practice, and practice for action.

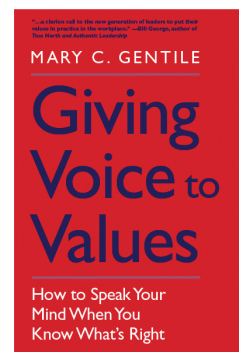
Moral Conviction

For example, I came across some research done by two scholars independently, Perry London and Douglas Huneke. They both studied what they called "moral conviction,"

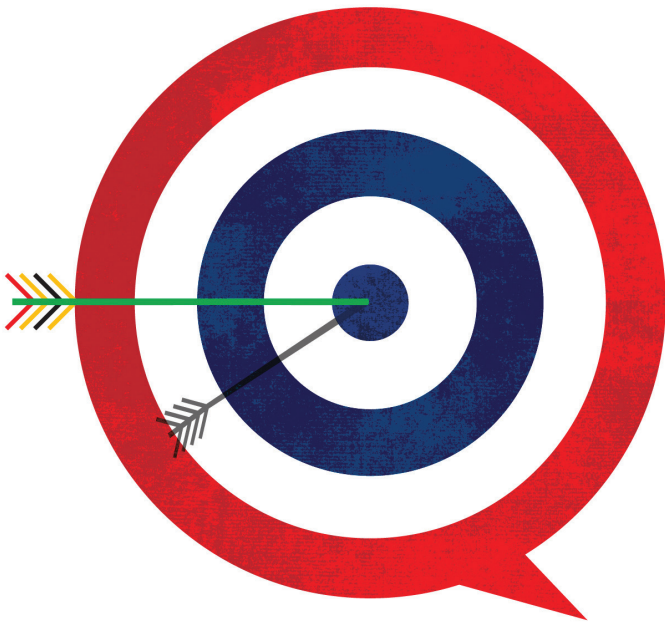
doing in-depth interviews with people who had acted on their values in high-risk, high-stakes situations. They both independently decided to interview rescuers from World War II. These are people who acted to help protect those who were at risk from the Holocaust, at a great risk to themselves. They were trying to see if these people had any common background or personal experience, life experience, family background, history, religion, or education that led them to act with this kind of conviction when so many others did not.

These interviews led them to identify a set of characteristics, one of which really stuck with me. Many of these people who had acted with so much conviction in these high-risk situations reported that at an earlier point in their lives, usually as a young adult, they had had the experience of rehearsing out loud, with a teacher, a boss, a mentor, even a parent, what they would do if they were to face some kind of moral conflict. This constitutes pre-scripting, rehearsal and peer coaching. It was both a cognitive experience and a behavioral experience. At the cognitive level, they had already identified the values that mattered to them in the situations that were being described. They articulated it. And at the behavioral level, they had the experience of voicing it out loud to someone more senior to them, who stood in as proxy for the kind of person they might need to communicate with in the actual circumstances.

This idea of pre-scripting and rehearsal was interesting, so I started to look



Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right empowers business leaders with the skills to voice and act on their values, and align their professional path with their principles. The Giving Voice to Values approach has been piloted in over 1,020 schools and organizations on all seven continents.



Rather than asking people to *think* their way into a different way of acting, ask them to *act* their way into a different way of thinking.

at other research. There's a field in psychology called the study of positive deviance—of people who deviate from the norm, but in a positive direction. These scholars have a nice phrase: They say that if you want to have an impact on people's behavior, rather than asking them to think their way into a different way of acting, it is more impactful to ask them to act their way into a different way of thinking.¹

The Self-Defense Class Revelation

But the research we're going to talk about here is from the field of kinesthetics, or the study of physical movement. Quite a few years ago, when I first went to work at Harvard Business School, I decided I was going to take a self-defense class. I looked around Boston and found a lot of these courses that all taught pretty much the same thing. They teach you physical moves—fist to the bridge of the nose, heel to the instep, and knee to the groin. You practice these moves in the air with the idea that if anyone ever attacks you, you'll know what to do.

But one course was different. It was called model mugging, and it was a developmental model. Instructors started out by teaching all the physical moves, which we would practice in the air. Once we knew the moves, they brought in a gentleman in a padded suit, sort of like the Michelin Man. He lined us all up and we would take turns being attacked by him, and when he attacked us, we could use all those moves full force on him because he was protected. I might be talking to

someone, and he would come up and grab me, and I never knew what hold he was going to use or when he was going to grab me.

The program was based on research about the concept of specific state muscle memory. The idea is that if you rehearse something in the same physiological and cognitive and emotional state that you'll be in when you need to use it, your body remembers, even if you freeze in the moment. And so, one day I lay on my back on the floor in this class because I'd failed to protect myself, and I wondered if it would be possible to create a kind of "moral muscle memory"—a default to informed voice in action when one confronts values conflicts.

The Thought Experiment

This idea was bolstered by the interviews I was doing and the stories I was collecting from business and organizational professionals at all levels (from junior to senior) who had confronted values challenges and found ways to act effectively. I was learning that it was usually not a matter of going up to someone and accusing them of being all wrong or unethical or villains. The successful approaches were much more strategic, tactical, and nuanced. These people used all the skills they'd developed throughout their careers on effective communication, on power and influence, on problem reframing, and then applying those skills to a values conflict. This was the "aha" moment. We tend to approach ethics education

and values training as if it were a matter of teaching people to be aware of the issues and being able to effectively analyze whether a situation is over the line or not. And that is important, but we also need to be taught how to act once we know what's right. To address this missing piece, I created the Giving Voice to Values pedagogy and curriculum, and something I call the "Giving Voice to Values thought experiment."

The Giving Voice to Values thought experiment consists of short scenarios that end with someone who already knows what they believe the right thing to do is, and the question for discussion and co-creation is about how they could get the right thing done, effectively. Learners are asked to pre-script and rehearse their implementation plans: What do you need to say? What do you need to do? How can you be effective? What data do you need to gather? My colleagues and I created many, many of these examples, hundreds of pieces of material (most of which is free online at givingvoicetovalue.org). Then we started to invite people to use it, and now it's being used all over the world. It has been piloted on all seven continents and is being used in business schools and in organizations like GFOA.

We know from research that when people encounter values conflicts, we don't sit down and make a pros and cons list. We don't stop and ask ourselves, "What would Aristotle say? What would John Rawls say?" We tend to just act automatically, usually driven by emotion, based on what we feel is

possible, and then we rationalize post hoc, explaining to ourselves why what we did was the right thing, or why it was the only thing we could do. That's why focusing on ethical analysis in our trainings is not enough—you're responding unconsciously in the moment, which prevents you from even acknowledging that you've made an ethical choice. We're trying to rewire that automatic connection.

This is the point of the thought experiment. We jump over the question of what's the right thing to do and instead ask, "What if you were going to do X, which you believe is right; how could you get it done?" In doing this, you develop scripts and action plans and rehearse, and voice them with your peers, with the people you would need to be talking to in the actual situation. This builds a new automatic response and helps you feel as if you have more choices when such situations arise.

The Three Flips

So as you can see, the Giving Voice to Values process is just a matter of reframing. There are three flips at the heart of it: flipping *what* you're talking about when you talk about values and ethics, *whom* you think you're talking to, and *how* you're having the conversation.

So the first "flip" is about what sorts of ethics questions we should focus on in our discussions. People often think that the so-called "black and white" or "right/wrong" issues are easy and that we need to focus on the grey areas instead when we do ethics training. But the reason these issues are grey areas is because they tend to be situations where reasonable people of goodwill and intelligence can legitimately disagree. Nevertheless, there are still many more clear-cut issues where most of us would agree that the situation is clearly over the line—it's clearly fraudulent, it clearly violates our code of ethics, it's clearly abusive. But just because we may agree doesn't mean that we believe we can act on it effectively. The Giving Voice to Values scenarios try to focus on those so-called clear-cut issues so people can rehearse and practice how to act effectively. If we focused only on the gray areas, we would never get past the question about "how many angels dance

on the head of a pin" We would remain stuck in the debate and we would never get to the preparation for ethical action.

The second flip is whom we think we're talking to. Based on research by J. Gregory Dees and Peter Cramton on ethics and negotiations,² we think of our audience as a bell curve. At one tail end of the curve is the organization you're working with, the people you're encountering. On one end of the curve are people who would self-identify as "opportunists," that is people who would say, "I'll do whatever it takes to maximize my material self-interest, regardless of values." This is their primary motivation. At the other tail end of the bell curve are the folks who would self-identify as "idealists," people who say, "I'll always try to act on my values, regardless of the impact of my self-interest." But most of us tend to fall under the bell—we call them "pragmatists," or people who would say, "I would like to act on my values, so long as it doesn't put me at a systematic disadvantage."

Pragmatists aren't saying they'll only act on their values if they know they'll succeed or that they will never have to pay a price. Rather they are saying that they just need to believe they have a shot at succeeding. We're focusing on giving the pragmatists scripts, action plans, skills, confidence, rehearsal, peer coaching, and the positive examples to be who *they already want to be at their best*. This isn't about changing yourself; it's about empowering yourself.

And the last flip is about how we do all this. And we already explained this: Instead of asking what's right, we focus on how to get the right thing done. 📌

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¹ Perry London, "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians who saved Jews from the Nazis," in J. Macaulay and L. Berkowitz, eds., *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social Psychological Studies of Some Antecedents and Consequences* Academic Press, 1970) and Douglas H. Huneke, *The Moses of Rovno* (Dodd, Mead, 1985).

² Gregory Dees and Peter Crampton, "Shrewd Bargaining on the Moral Frontier: Toward a Theory of Morality in Practice," *Business Ethics Quarterly*, April 1991, vol. 1, no. 2.



Practice with These Ethical Case Studies

Mary and GFOA's Shayne Kavanagh have put together some scenarios you can use to practice handling common ethical quandaries. These scenarios are designed to help you become more skillful and confident, and even comfortable, in your responses to ethical concerns. Giving voice to your values can create win-win situations, allowing you to have your cake and eat it, too.

The first exercise is pretty straightforward—a good warm-up—and the second one is much tougher.



The issue: Following your organization's gift policy while maintaining a good working relationship with your boss.

Susan, who is going to be the treasurer for a city in Ontario, is attending the GFOA conference with her boss, John. The city's gift policy doesn't allow employees to accept anything valued at more than \$25 from a vendor; however, they've gotten an invitation from the city's financial advisor to attend a steak dinner and a baseball game. That seems like something that

would be valued at more than \$25, so Susan thinks they should decline the invitation.

On the flight to Los Angeles, John asks Susan if she will attend the dinner or the ballgame, and she says, “Well, under our gift policy, I don’t think I can accept that invitation.” John replies, “Oh, it’s fine—this is what people do at an event like this. Don’t worry about it—it’s not a big deal. The policy is aimed at stopping real corruption like nepotism and personal relationships. And that’s not what we’re doing.”

Susan wants to comply with her government’s policy, but she still needs to remain a good working relationship with her boss.

Questions to work through

What is the values-based position that Susan is trying to act on? This one is pretty clear: Susan wants to comply with the policy, not just for policy’s sake but also to recognize the fact that the policy is there for a reason and that it’s important to have an impartial relationship with vendors. She’s also concerned about sending signals that will deteriorate people’s sense of how serious to take other policies.

What is at stake for all the parties?

Susan is having a values conflict, and John does not appear to be. He just wants to enjoy a nice evening, something he might look forward to attending every year. He doesn’t see this as an unethical act. And of course, there are some stakes for the other members of the organization who will be influenced by John and Susan’s choices.

What are the reasons and rationalizations? John is saying, “Well, everybody does this thing, it’s not a big deal, don’t worry about it. This doesn’t apply to us—this is for other people.” Those are some examples of reasons and rationalization one might face. And what Susan might be hearing from John is, “I’m your boss, you can trust me.” He’s letting her know this is, in part, a question of loyalty.

What would be the most effective action plan Susan could use to enact her values? Here are some potential approaches.

- Susan could tell John she can’t attend because she isn’t feeling well. This tactic addresses Susan’s not wanting to be a part of this

situation, but it doesn’t deal with the ethical position she wants to take or address the signal being sent to the organization about taking guidelines and policies seriously. That would probably be better than doing nothing, but if you really want to practice voicing and acting on your values and helping your organization behave according to the code of ethics that you’re developing, you may want to find a way to have this conversation.

- Susan could pay for the dinner on her own. Saying “I’ll go, but I feel like I should pay” is a way of politely saying you disagree—but it still doesn’t address the signal sent to the organization.
- Susan could suggest that she and John talk about the policy and maybe even revise it to clarify these kinds of choices. This is a constructive approach because it’s not about blaming anybody. It’s about what the organization is really trying to achieve with the policy and where the line should be drawn. If this is a place where we want to make an exception, what are the criteria that allow us to do so? And how do we make that clearer, so we’re not sending a signal to the rest of the organization that the policies don’t really count?



SCENARIO 2

The issue: Providing accurate information to your council board without upsetting your boss.

Mike is a finance director. He was appointed by the mayor, and it’s an election year. The mayor has asked Mike to research a new tax proposal that would be lobbied to address the opioid crisis in the city. Mike and his finance team set out to diligently analyze the proposal and provide a forecast and potential revenues and costs. There’s a lot of uncertainty because this program is new and the tax is not something the city has used before, so Mike has built in certain caveats and assumptions. He explains his rationale for his forecast and provides a series of ranges to express that uncertainty.

The problem is that when the mayor announces his proposal, he shares only the highest part of the revenue range

and the lowest part of the cost range, which will obviously paint a favorable picture of the proposal. But Mike knows this isn’t realistic and expresses his concerns to the mayor, who says, “I’m the mayor, I’ve made the decision. You’ve done your analysis. Now, it’s your job to back me up.” In fact, the mayor wants Mike to testify directly to the city council about the mayor’s version of the facts because the mayor knows that Mike has a good working relationship with the council and they trust the work he does.

Mike doesn’t believe this proposal is a good representation of the facts, but he’s being asked to use his credibility to advance it.

Questions to work through

What is the values-based position that Mike is trying to act on? Full transparency, truth telling, and honesty.

What is at stake for all the parties?

Mike wants to preserve his own integrity and the reputation of the finance team. He also wants to maintain a good working relationship with both the mayor and the city council. What the mayor may be overlooking is that his own credibility is at stake, as well. What’s at stake for taxpayers is what they’re paying for and what they’re getting for their money.

What are the reasons and rationalizations?

The mayor might say: “You’re just giving in to fear by assuming the worst. But what about the risk of not doing anything at all? It’s a good program, and you should support it. We can do damage control later.” He might also say, “It’s an election year. Don’t you want to keep your job?” And he might say, “I expect loyalty from you.”

The four rationalizations you hear most often in these kinds of situations are:

- It’s standard operating procedure.
- It’s not material. It’s not a big enough deal to worry about.
- It’s not your worry, it’s my responsibility.
- I expect your loyalty to me.

These sorts of “reasons and rationalizations” are powerful, but they are not bullet-proof. With Giving Voice to Values, we pre-script and rehearse responses to these arguments. There are many examples in the Giving

There are often many strategies that you can try to give voice to your values.



Voice to Values book and curriculum. For example, if the mayor uses the “materiality” argument, Mike might say that this is precisely why now is the easiest time to address the issue, before it becomes a bigger risk and while it is easier to make adjustments because there are fewer “sunk costs.” Or if the mayor says, “This is just standard operating procedure; everyone does this,” Mike might respond by sharing examples of how he has developed a good working relationship with the council precisely because they have worked through such decisions honestly in the past, and that their trust in the finance group is an invaluable resource that the mayor will want to be able to rely upon. And so on.

What would be the most effective action plan Mike could use to enact his values?

- Work out his strategy in advance, not on the floor of the meeting. Mike can tell the mayor, “These questions are going to come up. Let’s get our ducks in the row so we’re ready for them.”
- Point out to the mayor that Mike needs to preserve his credibility to be an effective agent for him in the future. If Mike burns his credibility on this, the council won’t trust him anymore, and he won’t be able to get anything else done for the mayor. An opioid program is not something that produces results overnight—it’s a multiyear proposition, so there will be lots of things he’ll need to do in the future to make the program a success, like getting the tax reauthorized, or the budget for the

program—any number of things that might need council approval. Losing the council’s trust wouldn’t be good for the mayor’s ultimate goal.

- Support the mayor’s passion for the project. It’s always good to be able to establish that you’re actually on the same side—Mike and the mayor both want to develop an effective program for the public to deal with crisis. And to make the plan work, the two of them need to establish their options in case things don’t go according to plan.
- Given the understanding above, Mike can propose that he can explain to the council that the mayor’s presentation is a set of goals, adding that since things can obviously happen, they’re also building contingencies. This way you’re signaling that this is the scenario you want but also acknowledging that it might not play out precisely in this way, without necessarily providing all the other numbers.
- Just burn the mayor because he’s unethical. Circumstances could make this approach necessary, but we all know that blowing the whistle can be costly. It’s better to learn how to raise these issues early, before things get to that point, so you don’t actually have to be in the situation of blowing the whistle. Addressing the opioid crisis is a good thing; maybe the mayor’s done a lot of other good things and this is a lapse. In that case, Mike should probably try other strategies before they get to the “burn it all down” stage.

There are often many strategies that you can try to give voice to your values. Not all of them will work in every situation, so you need to have as many arrows in your quiver as possible so you can figure out what’s going to be realistic and feasible in your situation. Then you can rehearse and practice these strategies with your peers.



RESOURCES

GFOA’s Code of Ethics, available front and center on the homepage of GFOA’s new website (gfoa.org).

GFOA’s trust audio series and white paper, also available at gfoa.org. You can also access them from the GFOA newsletter. These include stories and the rules for delivering bad news well.

GFOA’s Giving Voice to Values training. This on-demand training session puts together groups of people to do the course together, going through elements of the Giving Voice to Values program. (Look for “Giving Voice to Values” on the Events calendar at gfoa.org.)