

Ethikos Volume 34, Number 2. February 01, 2020 On ethics: Mary C. Gentile, PhD

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An interview by Adam Turteltaub, CHC, CCEP, SCCE & HCCA Vice President of Strategic Initiatives & International Program.

AT: Giving Voice to Values is well known as a program, but its genesis is less well known. Can you tell us what led to its creation?

MG: I had been writing, teaching, and consulting on values-driven leadership, business ethics, and diversity and inclusion for several decades at business schools and with companies, and I became increasingly frustrated and disillusioned. It seemed that too often we approached these values conflicts in our organizations as if they were primarily or even entirely cognitive issues. The presumption was that if only we just recognized these issues when they arose and had a decision-making framework for determining what was acceptable, ethical, and responsible, we would be all set.

But I found that all too often, people actually did have a pretty good idea when something didn't smell right; they just didn't know how they could act effectively on this recognition, engaging others to see what they saw and without harming their career prospects. So building what I call Awareness (the recognition of ethical issues) and Analysis (the application of appropriate rules and models of ethical reasoning) was not enough. In fact, the endless discussions of ethical dilemmas in business education and in corporate training sometimes could feel like it was a sort of "schooling for sophistry," where we simply rehearsed the various rationalizations for the easiest or least conflicted course of action or perhaps simply spun our wheels with arguments and counterarguments, leaving participants with no actionable takeaways and the feeling that there really were no right answers.

Out of this frustration was born the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach to values-driven leadership development. Increasingly I saw that what was missing from this focus on Awareness and Analysis was the necessary complement: a focus on Action. Increasingly I saw research that suggested that if you really wanted to have an impact on people's behavior, a focus on pre-scripting, implementation planning, rehearsal for voice and action, and peer coaching was a necessary and effective approach. The objective is to build a sort of moral muscle memory. Rather than only asking folks, "What would you do?" in a particular situation, GVV asks, "What if you were this manager or employee who knows what he or she believes is right and appropriate? How could you get it done effectively? What do you say and do? What data would you need? How would you reframe the issue to influence others? What objections would you face (in GVV parlance, we call those the "Reasons and Rationalizations"), and how would you respond to those?" And so on.

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