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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.

Almost immediately we saw an enthusiastic response to this action-focused approach. Organizations saw it as a valuable part of leadership development as well as ethics and compliance programs. And individuals found it empowering; rather than a preach-and-pretend model, GVV was practical and useful. Rather than a focus on "thou shalt not" — never appealing to outcome-oriented individuals — GVV was a can-do approach to values and ethics in organizations.

AT: One of the challenges with values is that too often we are willing to discard them when they prove inconvenient, whether because of greed or pressure to “just get it done.” And I don’t just mean that at work. In our personal lives, as well, expediency often beats out principle. What do you think lies at the root of this deep but fragile relationship between ourselves and our values?

MG: Increasingly researchers like Jonathan Haidt have shown that our response to conflicted situations is often to react immediately and emotionally, without doing the sort of analysis and considered weighing of pros and cons or application of ethical reasoning that is often recommended. This response, in the moment, is often unconscious (or nearly so). We tend to take the path of least resistance and then rationalize post hoc why this was the only thing we could do, or even the right thing to do. Even if we are aware of the decision we are making, often we feel as if we had no choice.

Rather than simple exhortations to do the right thing or endless debates about what that right thing may be, GVV is about actually giving us the chance to look at real examples of those who have acted on their values effectively; to recognize the sorts of approaches that were successful in different situations; to generate and rehearse persuasive responses to the most frequently heard Reasons and Rationalizations for unethical choices, such as, “It’s not material,” or, “It’s standard operating procedure around here”; to generate possible action plans; and to engage in peer coaching to make them stronger. And this rehearsal means that we have the opportunity and even the requirement to act *as if* we intended to behave ethically. We actually short-circuit the automatic and emotional response to values conflicts described above, allowing us to do a sort of rewiring of that response through the social cohort-based efforts at problem-solving and pre-scripting.

In this way, we build the sense that we actually have more choices than we may have assumed.

AT: Some people are great examples of staying true to their principles, even when there are great incentives not to. What distinguishes people who successfully stand up and raise discussions of values, especially against a strong tide?

MG: There are probably a number of reasons why some folks act on their values more than others. Some may have had very strong role models in their lives—perhaps in their upbringing or schooling, or perhaps from the leaders and the culture of the organizations where they work. Some folks may simply be more prone to confrontation and comfortable with conflict, so they apply that personality trait to ethical issues as well as anything else. And just because some folks may stand up for their values more often does not mean that they will be the most successful at it.

But I am more interested in building this capacity for values-driven action in more of us, making it a more natural response rather than seeing it as an exceptional quality that only occurs in a select few. And I am more interested in helping folks to practice approaches and strategies that actually have a chance of being effective. Rather than focusing on moral courage, GVV focuses on moral competence.

One of the 7 Pillars of GVV is a focus on “Self-Knowledge and Alignment.” That is, we help folks to reflect on when and how they are most comfortable, most confident, and most competent at influence and action, and then we ask them to frame any values conflict in a way that plays to these individual strengths. That is, the extrovert will likely be more effective with one strategy, while the introvert may do well with an entirely different approach; and we include examples in the GVV curriculum of individuals who achieved their values-driven objectives in very different ways.

We do this because we have seen that if we simply ask everyone to act with moral courage or to speak up, not only will they not necessarily be effective if they do so, some will simply disqualify themselves, believing that this sort of approach is the act of a hero or a martyr—not themselves. GVV focuses on building a variety of approaches so

that each of us will feel that we have more choices than we may have thought.

AT: How can this emphasis on values be successfully woven into a compliance program?

MG: GVV has been piloted in well over 1,170 educational settings, companies, and other organizations on all seven continents. There are hundreds of pieces of curriculum (most free to download); a massive open online course from Coursera and the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business; customizable, interactive online modules from Nomadic Learning; books; and videos (www.givingvoicetovalue.org).

Companies and other organizations have used one or more of these approaches to design GVV training programs, to build GVV into existing compliance or leadership development programs, and simply to reframe the sorts of decision-making and problem-solving conversations that managers engage in with their teams. The approach is powerful and accessible, and is primarily focused on the "GVV Thought Experiment": that is, asking and rehearsing answers to the questions, "What if I were going to act on my values in this situation? How could I be effective?" We have also worked with organizations to consider how leaders can use the GVV methodology to build their capacity to better hear and respond to values-driven messages from their employees.

AT: How can leadership instill values-based decision-making, especially in the middle management levels, where people often feel as if they are getting pulled in all directions?

MG: As noted above, the pre-scripting, implementation planning, peer coaching, and actual rehearsal for values-driven action that is at the heart of GVV is not only effective to better voice values-driven behavior, it is also valuable for building the ability to hear and respond to these sorts of messages when they are brought to a manager. For middle managers who are often in this push-pull situation between their reports and their own supervisors, this dual-sided skill-building is essential.

For example, when a major multinational consumer products firm decided to introduce GVV into their Nigeria operations, they brought a group of middle managers together with the leadership team to practice the GVV approach around company and region-specific values challenges. They all focused on the same GVV-style scenarios, but the middle managers pre-scripted and rehearsed how to raise an issue effectively, while the senior leaders discussed how a middle manager could raise this issue with them in a manner that would make it easier for them (the senior leaders) to respond effectively. When both groups came together to debrief, they ended up engaging in a sort of natural social contracting, where they talked about both how middle managers could present the issues more effectively and how leaders could respond more constructively. This resulted in the organization adopting a sort of "GVV Contract," committing to more effective behaviors on both sides.

AT: Let me end by asking for prognostication from you. Values of society do change over time. What was acceptable behavior for one generation looks archaic to the next. How do you see values in the business world evolving over the next few years?

MG: There are core human values that tend to remain constant over time and across culture; the philosophers call them "hyper-norms." The good news is that this common core provides the foundation for communication and shared purpose; the other news is that it is a very short list! However, although these norms tend to persevere, their application and interpretation tends to change over time. So although compassion and justice/fairness appear to be constants, the span of their application has evolved. A variety of issues factor into these changes: demographic shifts, technological advances, shifts in resource availability, etc.

Another important observation is that the same factor is often the source of both a new challenge and also its resolution. For example, as technology has presented us with many new ethical perils, it also holds the seeds to many of their resolutions and/or mitigation.

With this as backdrop, I think increasingly we will see a greater role for employee voice and action in the business world. This shift from hierarchical structures to a more participative organizational culture has been coming for some time now, but increasingly the pressure and the voice will be coming from the employees themselves. Witness recent employee actions at Google, Wayfair, and others, fueled by social media's reach and strength.

Of course, this employee voice has both positive aspects as well as risks. For this reason, I believe that the development of more effective, more considered, and more deeply understanding skills for voices—and for hearing those voices—are absolutely essential. Rather than simply amplifying the loudest voices, GVV builds the capacity for the most ethical and equitable ones to surface and prevail.

AT: Thank you, Mary.

To learn more about Giving Voice to Values you may use the following links: www.givingvoicetovalues.org or www.marygentile.com. You may contact Mary at gentilem@arden.virginia.edu.

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