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Andra Gumbus
Sacred Heart University

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Book Review

Giving voice to values: how to speak your mind when you know what's right

Mary Gentile

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Reviewed by Andra Gumbus

Sacred Heart University,
CT, USA

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Chuck Prince (former CEO of Citigroup) said, “As long as the music is playing, you have to get up and dance” Does this hold true for business ethics, and acting on your values, or can skills that allow for alternatives in the business realm be developed, and honed? This is the fundamental question explored in the newly released Yale University Press book *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right* by Mary C. Gentile. Gentile is a 10-year veteran of the Harvard Business School and a pioneer in both fields of business ethics and diversity management. Currently she is director of the Giving Voice to Values curriculum and senior research scholar at Babson College.

The book provides you an alternative solution to resolving ethical dilemmas that might crop up in the workplace. Gentile argues that we do not spend time on action and developing plans and scripts to respond in a way that corresponds with our values of what is right and wrong. Gentile further argues that simple awareness and analysis of an ethical dilemma are not enough, nor is relying on the standard ethical decision-making frameworks that are traditionally taught in business courses, such as justice, rights, virtue, and utilitarianism. The author comes up with a new approach called the “Giving Voice to Values (GVV)” approach, which allows us to write scripts that counter the commonly heard reasons and rationalizations that prevent us from acting on our values. The approach allows you to practice how to handle the discomfort that can result from acting counter to the prevailing values at work or when placed in a sticky situation that challenges your moral compass. The author of this review has used the GVV approach and materials at both the graduate level in a course titled Legal and Social Responsibilities in Business and at the undergraduate level in a required Business Ethics course at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT. Sacred Heart University has made a conscious decision to infuse the entire undergraduate business degree with an emphasis on a values-based decision-making approach.

A virtuous circle

The GVV approach is built upon various assumptions – primarily that we all want to work hard, and be able to bring our best selves into our workplaces, yet we can encounter corporate cultures,

bosses, co-workers, or clients that cause value conflicts. In addition we can experience negative repercussions in our career or face social disapproval for going against the grain. In doing this GVV does not fall prey to the dreaded P's : preaching, parochialism, pettiness, and paternalism. This little gem of a book provides stories of people who have delivered effective responses when put in challenging situations, and gives the reader the tools to identify, deconstruct, and respond to rationalizations and barriers to ethical behavior. It takes the standard model of teaching ethics and turns the kaleidoscope to view a refreshingly unique lens through which we see, define, and respond to ethical dilemmas.

The working metaphor of GVV is akin to someone learning a new sport or physical skill. The approach is practiced in a supportive environment where confidence and fluency in the delivery of alternative responses can thrive. As Gentile puts it, "rather than experiencing that deer-in-the-headlights feeling when we confront values conflicts, our muscle memory can kick in and the emotionality of the moment is reduced ... we can expand our sense of what's possible – another virtuous circle." The approach is delightfully positive as opposed to the many cases we have all read about ethical disasters as of late that provide a negative example of what went horribly wrong instead of how to do it right.

Distinctive features of the GVV curriculum include the following:

- (1) A focus on *positive examples* of times when folks *have* found ways to voice, and thereby implement their values in the workplace.
- (2) An emphasis on the importance of finding an *alignment* between one's individual sense of purpose and that of the organization (an alignment that involves self-assessment and a focus on one's individual strengths).
- (3) The opportunity to *construct and practice responses* to the most frequently heard reasons and rationalizations for *not* acting on one's values.
- (4) The opportunity to *build commitment* by providing repeated opportunities for participants to practice delivering their responses and to learn to provide peer feedback and coaching to enhance effectiveness (www.givingvoicetovalues.org).

Building confidence and skill

GVV begins with an engaging exercise that builds confidence and skill by having participants write about two situations: one where we spoke up and acted to resolve a conflict in a way that was consistent with our values, and the other when we did not. As an opening activity it allows for powerful learning at both individual and organizational levels by juxtaposing the two stories, and answering reflection questions that define personal, and organizational motivators and inhibitors that were a part of the situation. This generates a list of enablers and disablers to voicing values.

Giving Voice to Values is about learning how to act on your values effectively – not about wondering whether you could. The components that form the foundation of the GVV approach are in the steps below.

Values

Know and appeal to a short list of widely shared values: for example, honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. In other words, don't assume too little – or too much – commonality with the viewpoints of others.

Choice

Believe you have a choice about voicing values by examining your own track record. Know what has enabled and disabled you in the past, so you can work with and around these factors. And recognize, respect, and appeal to the capacity for choice in others.

Normality

Expect values conflicts so that you approach them calmly and competently. Over-reaction can limit your choices unnecessarily.

Purpose

Define your personal and professional purpose explicitly, and broadly before conflicts arise. What is the impact you most want to have? Similarly, appeal to a sense of purpose in others.

Self-knowledge, self-image, and alignment

Generate a "self-story" about voicing and acting on your values that is consistent with who you are, and that builds on your strengths. There are many ways to align your unique strengths and style with your values. If you view yourself as a "pragmatist," for example, find a way to view voicing your values as pragmatic.



Voice

Practice voicing your values in front of respected peers using the style of expression with which you are most comfortable and skilled. This also involves using a style of expression that is most appropriate to the situation, and which invites/allows coaching and feedback. You are more likely to say those words that you have pre-scripted for yourself and already heard yourself express.

Reasons and rationalizations

Anticipate the typical rationalizations given for ethically questionable behavior, and identify counter-arguments. These rationalizations are predictable, and vulnerable to reasoned response (www.givingvoicetovalue.org).

Why work?

The GVV approach spends time up front having participants focus on why they work in a broad sense. Your professional and career purpose is analyzed using broadly based goals that are part of an organization, and as a citizen within a broader society. Terms such as providing value to customers, and providing good jobs in a supportive work environment illustrate the scope. An exploration of the impact we want to have in our job or profession, and an appeal to others' sense of purpose is part of this definition. A tool is described that surveys professional and personal tendencies and preferences (Personal-Professional Profile can be found in the appendix). Self-knowledge, self-image, and alignment to strengths facilitate speaking from a position that is familiar and confident. Stories of individuals who have voiced their values reveal five areas that make it easier to act on values when faced with a conflict and are assessed using the profile. They are definition of purpose, personal risk profile, personal communication style or preferences, loyalty profile, and self-image.

Gentile refers to this as our self-story – a narrative of who we are, and what we stand for that can help support using our voice with confidence when we face fear of lack of acceptance, or run the risk of being labeled naïve, not willing to make difficult calls, or disloyal to the company. This prefaces the cornerstone chapters of the book that focus on finding your voice and overcoming reasons and rationalizations not to use your voice.

Finding voice

The uniqueness and therefore the strength of the book lies in the emphasis given to examples of

individuals who found their voice, and overcame the prevailing winds of doubt and rationalizations and found a safe harbor. Gentile explores the fact that there are a myriad of ways to voice values, some working better in certain situations with certain audiences. She admits that we are perhaps more skillful or comfortable with an approach we prefer, and this might make or break our decision to speak. Her genuine and easy style of conveying simple truths that are not rocket science allows the reader to relate, and feel like you are being coached by a good friend. Gentile understands that some organizations, and bosses can either help or hinder using voice, yet reassures us that there are things we can do to increase our chances of success and the likelihood that we will exercise our voice. She stresses practice and coaching. Gentile makes all of her points using well-referenced researchers and scholars in the field, but she also draws on common sense to support her accusations. She profiles Lisa Baxter as an example of someone who developed her voice over many years, and made many decisions to intervene when she was a novice as well as a seasoned executive and faced injustice at work. The story of Lisa Baxter is one of many individual profiles that Gentile narrates in order to make her approach come to life. Baxter is used as a vehicle to enumerate a tool kit of enablers for voicing values such as: experience, positive reinforcement, mentors, support systems, and practice. Having followed Lisa Baxter as a new hire early in her career as well as having been a senior executive allows Gentile to dispel the common myths that we are too novice to speak up at the one end, and too vested at the other. She illustrates effective use of voice at both ends of the career spectrum among junior and senior employees.

Reasoned response to rationalizations

An unethical course of action usually results when we justify pursuing a questionable goal using reasons and rationalizations. In order to counter an unethical choice, Gentile encourages the formation of scripts by answering the following four questions to get at the motivations that guide choices:

- What is the action or decision that we believe is right?
- What are the main arguments against this course that we're likely to encounter? What are the reasons and rationalizations we will need to address?

- What's at stake for the key parties, including those who disagree with us? And what's at stake for us?
- What are our most powerful and persuasive responses to the reasons and rationalizations we need to address? To whom should the argument be made? When and in what context?

These four questions are also used to debrief the GVV case studies that are a part of the curriculum found on the GVV website (but not found in the book). The book would have benefitted from the inclusion of sample cases in the appendix to illustrate how a story portrayed in the book was used to generate a teaching case. The presence of a sample graduate level and undergraduate level case would have enhanced the book and helped a reader to understand the GVV approach. I found this lacking, and if included it would further clarify the model.

Common categories of ethical dilemmas are reviewed based on research from the Institute for Global Ethics. These are: truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short term versus long term, and justice versus mercy. The most frequently used categories of rationalizations that we face when trying to speak out against unethical practices are also explored. These arguments are: expected or standard practice, materiality, locus of responsibility, and locus of loyalty. We hear them played out in the form of comments like, "everyone does it, it's standard practice, it doesn't hurt anyone, it's not my responsibility, just following orders, I don't want to hurt my team, boss, or company."

Gentile then proceeds to tear apart each of these rationalizations, and provides levers and strategies to help the reader script an effective response. By reframing them, she gives us ways to think, act, and position ourselves with counter arguments. This also helps to recognize these rationalizations when we hear them, to understand them, and be prepared to respond to them. A detailed story of how it all might play out is provided to illustrate the reasons, and rationalization plus the response that might be given to counter them. It is the story of Denise Foley and her decision to challenge the CEO's plan to sell their non-profit hospital to a for-profit institution. Foley felt that this decision would threaten the well-being of the community and she carefully articulated a message that went counter to the tendency to obey the authority of the CEO. Gentile artfully crafts a response to the

decision biases using this example. It is one of many that she calls upon to clarify and bring the message of GVV to life for the reader. These make for a very easily read and comprehended book that offers scripts and advice in practical terms.

Gentile also reviews decision biases that can affect ethical choices and lead to less than ethical decisions. She again makes these real for the reader by using stories of individuals who recognized the bias and created scripts to counter it. Some of the biases explored are obedience to authority, false consensus effect, over-optimism, self-serving bias, sunk cost and loss aversion, and other well documented and researched decision traps.

Idealism married with pragmatism

Giving Voice to Values is infused with examples of individuals who chose to focus their career narrative on what they could do based upon their position, not what they could not. These are examples of individuals who did not ask permission, but informed superiors respectfully and firmly. Rather than talk about disablers, and personal risk of speaking, they choose instead to frame a situation in terms of what can go wrong if I do NOT speak up. The idea that risk is in the eye of the beholder is a novel way to define personal and organizational risk. A junior member of a firm relied on fear to protect himself from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), ego as an ambitious young man, and his desire to learn from the industry. These seemingly opposing motivators propelled him to use his voice in a challenging situation to illustrate that indeed we can marry idealism with pragmatism.

Pearls of wisdom

In putting it all together, Gentile offers final words to the wise from those who found their voice. She reassures us that our arguments may not be perfect nor our voice unassailable. She cautions that we should reflect on the risks associated with not speaking up as opposed to those associated with speaking up. She encourages experimentation, and creativity noting that the most effective arguments may be the ones we least expect. But first and foremost, she gives us the courage to take control of our own lives, and careers, and to acknowledge that choice exists within many degrees of freedom. She invites us to become a peer coach in our business schools and organizations by practicing and sharing the GVV paradigm. This ultimately empowers us to "equip ourselves to know not only what is right, but also how to make it happen."



In the appendix, starting assumptions, an introductory exercise, examples of enablers, the Personal-Professional Profile, guidelines for peer coaching, and an action framework to do list are provided. For additional materials and the entire GVV curriculum the website provides a wealth of supporting articles, research, case studies that are drawn from the individual stories used in the book, and ways that business schools are using the GVV curriculum. For educators the teaching notes are available for the case studies as well.

Giving voice to values, not ethics

In conclusion, this book is not about giving voice to ethics, and does not emphasize externally imposed rules of what is right and wrong. It is about values that are individualistic, the beliefs we hold dear, and experience deeply. The values are clustered around those commonly held across cultures and diverse groups that are widely shared: honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. As Gentile writes, "giving voice may mean simply asking the well-framed and well-timed question that allows people to think in a new way about a situation. Or it may mean working to make sure

that certain information is included in a proposal that allows decision makers to see longer-term, or wider potential impacts for their choices than originally considered. It may mean speaking quietly behind the scenes, with someone who is better positioned than we are to raise an issue. Or it may mean simply finding another, ethically acceptable way to accomplish an assigned task." She concludes, "In the end, none of us can be certain in all situations what the right thing to do is, but we can agree that it is important to try to find and act on that 'right' and that empowering voice will move us forward in that endeavor."

About the author

Andra Gumbus is an Associate Professor of Management at the Welch College of Business at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. Her research in organizational behavior includes articles on human resources, career development and ethical issues in business. She has taught business ethics at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for the past 9 years. The GVV curriculum is a cornerstone of the Sacred Heart University program. Reach her at gumbusa@sacredheart.edu.