



## BOOK REVIEWS

***Giving Voice to Values*, by Mary C. Gentile (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010)**

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For those who teach business ethics, Mary Gentile's new book, *Giving Voice to Values*, offers an innovative and inspiring foundation for providing students with practical, grounded advice and skills in meeting one of the most important ethical challenges—standing up for what you believe is right. The Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach departs from the more traditional business ethics focus on confronting ethical dilemmas and applying different moral reasoning frameworks to these dilemmas, or courses organized along the lines of topical business ethics issues. Gentile takes the view, based on over a decade of experience teaching at the Harvard Business School, working with the Aspen Institute, and most recently as Senior Research Scholar at Babson College, that students quite often do know the “right thing to do.” And while a good number may not act on this knowledge, others do find a way to act or give voice to their values. This book is about the challenges individuals face and more importantly, the “enablers” that make it more likely that individuals will act on their values.

Gentile first provides an introduction to the evolution of the GVV initiative. She describes its genesis a decade ago when she realized that a critical gap in business ethics education was the lack of attention to the values conflicts students experienced, the sense that students knew, based on their values, how to respond to a particular situation but felt powerless or impeded at times to move to action. Out of this realization GVV was formally created in 2006 through a partnership between the Aspen Institute's Business & Society Program and Yale University's School of Management.

At the heart of *Giving Voice to Values* is a fundamental question Gentile poses at the opening of the book, “What if you were going to act on your values—what would you say and do?” Over a series of nine chapters, Gentile introduces readers to the key assumptions of GVV, discusses in depth seven core “pillars” that are fundamental to responding to this key question, and closes her book with an invitation to readers to both practice the GVV skills in their work lives and to support others' efforts to give voice to their values. Throughout these chapters Gentile draws on her experience working with individuals both in and out of the classroom setting and integrates a number of GVV cases as a way to reinforce key insights and introduce readers to part of the rich GVV curriculum materials.

Among twelve key assumptions that set the stage for the subsequent chapters four seem to be of particular importance. The first three connect motivation, experience, and future intention: I want to voice and act on my values; I have voiced my values in the past; I can voice my values more often and more effectively. This third assumption is particularly important for the GVV approach. GVV is based on the use of “scripts” as practical tools for translating values into action. Developing these scripts, prepared in advance of having conversations with others, is a competency and relies on skills that ideally are developed over time as individuals respond to situations and act on their values. In the same way that athletes develop muscle memory through practice, so Gentile argues, individuals develop a different kind of muscle memory of the will through the practice of developing scripts and using these scripts to affirm important values that may be challenged in organizational settings. The final assumption is: The more I believe it is possible to voice and act on my values, the more likely I will be to do so. This last assumption seems to be ultimately about converting belief into action.

The next seven chapters are devoted to the seven pillars of the GVV approach. The first pillar is “values.” Gentile distinguishes GVV, with its focus on internally held values from ethics, which she argues has more to do with externally imposed standards or roles. What counts for Gentile are “my values” and my belief that my values are worth voicing in a given situation, even if others may disagree with me. Values are therefore about choice while ethics is about compliance. Ethics scholars, particularly those who have devoted attention to the topic of ethical decision making would of course dispute the notion that ethics involves compliance to imposed rules. Nevertheless, the key issue for Gentile is ultimately about integrity—choosing to act in ways that are consistent with one’s values.

The importance of “choice” is reaffirmed in the next chapter as the second critical pillar. Gentile underscores the importance of individuals recognizing that they do have a choice about voicing their values and that there are both disablers that can undermine one’s capacity to make this choice, and enablers that can encourage and reinforce this capacity to choose. This chapter draws extensively on Gentile’s prior experience speaking with students around the world about situations when they were successful in voicing their values and when they were not. Gentile is particularly concerned with the role of what she calls “reasons and rationalizations” in weakening one’s commitment to expressing values that have been challenged. Gentile connects the experiences of others to research in the social sciences that documents the various ways we talk ourselves out of taking action, for example, convincing ourselves that someone else has already made up their mind, that our concerns are not “important enough,” and that we are stepping beyond our role. There are of course enablers that serve as a counterforce to these reasons and rationalizations, for example reframing a situation in ways that open up, rather than close off possibilities for expression, and relying on “allies” with whom we talk about and perhaps even rehearse what we want to say to others. These reasons and rationalizations are examined in greater depth in a later chapter in the book.

Gentile highlights one key enabler as a central pillar for GVV—the “normalizing” of values conflicts. Gentile suggests that rather than see values conflicts as

rare events, one should view values conflicts as an inevitable part of the job and work context. To see values conflicts in this way is to lower their stakes and make them seem less life and death. The key is to anticipate these values conflicts and not be surprised when they arise. When values conflicts are viewed as normal, Gentile suggests that we are also less likely to demonize others.

The next GVV pillar is about having a purpose that can serve as a foundation for working through values conflicts. Such a purpose, or in Aristotle's terms *telos*, does not according to Gentile lead to easier choices, "but the arguments become much more varied and robust. They come from a place of broader understanding and reflection, rather than knee-jerk reaction (106–07)." This chapter will resonate with business ethics scholars who argue for the importance of a focus for decision-making that goes beyond short-term bottom line considerations. What Gentile seems to be suggesting is that individuals and firms consider in a given situation who the relevant stakeholders might be and what a particular course of action might mean for them, looking beyond narrow self and organization purpose to consider a wider range of relevant stakeholder purposes.

Gentile uses her experience and insight to develop the fifth pillar which is about self-knowledge and playing to one's strengths. Gentile notes that often those who are successful in voicing their values use a style of interaction that fits them, rather than some broad generalized style. She urges her readers to consider developing a "personal-professional profile" (the Appendix includes a helpful set of questions for readers to use to develop this profile) that represents the specific particular strengths and risk factors that can influence one's confidence and competence in developing scripts and discussing values conflicts with others. Some may prefer a more questioning and open inquiring style of interaction while others, who see themselves more as "idealists," may not be comfortable with trade-offs and therefore will want to develop a different kind of structured script to guide interactions. In this chapter Gentile integrates specific examples from cases drawn from the GVV collection to highlight how others have adopted particular styles to communicate their values-based positions to others. As I read this chapter, I saw a connection to the notion of identity, not as a catalogue of traits or attributes, but rather as a kind of narrative identity that one develops and defines over time.

Finding one's voice is the sixth pillar, and in this chapter, Gentile returns to considerations raised earlier about enablers and disablers that can influence the expression of values. Gentile offers some concrete examples, once again using GVV case study materials, of how to draw on important enablers to overcome barriers one might face in the workplace. One case focuses on "reframing" as a key enabler. In this case a junior investment analyst is encouraged by her boss to revise upward a client's portfolio performance. The analyst views both herself and her boss as newcomers to the organization and needing to make a strong impression—with the client and with others in the organization. While the analyst is uncomfortable with altering the performance report, she feels the pressure to go along with her boss's request. Gentile then presents how through reframing the situation, the analyst is able to find her voice, "She pointed to her boss's newness in the group as an argument for why they should not adjust the benchmarks, suggesting that they explain that

the poor performance happened before their watch and that they would focus their client presentation on the opportunities they saw to turn things around now (145).” Along with skillful reframing Gentile emphasizes other enablers—allies, mentors, experience, and practice, in the sense of learning from one’s experience and using this insight to shape subsequent efforts at voicing one’s values. At the close of this chapter, Gentile comes back to a point reinforced throughout the book, “the more we practice using our voice when it comes to values, the more skillful, confident, and comfortable we can be in doing so.”

The penultimate chapter, “Reasons and Rationalizations,” is devoted to the seventh and final pillar of GVV—the development and use of practical scripts to facilitate moving from intention to action. Gentile underscores the importance of confronting and overcoming self-defeating arguments and decision making biases such as “Everyone does this,” “I’m just following orders” and others that many will recognize from the managerial decision making literature. Gentile suggests that in developing scripts it is important to consider a series of questions:

- What is the action or decision that we believe is right?
- What are the main arguments against this course of action 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 is 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 arguments be made? When and in what context?

Gentile once again draws on the GVV cases to highlight some different strategies for developing these scripts, in particular highlighting how to recognize reasons and rationalizations and ways to counter these arguments. In addition to the strategy of reframing highlighted in the investment analyst case, she mentions other possibilities such as appealing to long run as well as short run interests, focusing on an individual or group’s wider purpose, and acknowledging the costs and stakes for key parties and developing arguments that recognize the importance of these considerations.

In the closing chapter Gentile once again extends her invitation to join those who have found ways to voice their values in the workplace. In particular she encourages readers to support others in their efforts to give voice to values by serving as allies, mentors, and peer coaches. Gentile’s voice here, as throughout the book, is an encouraging and inspiring one, but not one disconnected from reality. She acknowledges that despite both good intentions and follow-through to voice one’s values, they may not always prevail. Gentile recognizes that the act of voicing values can be viewed as risky, but she also points to those who over the years have expressed to her the risk of *not* voicing their values. What is important for Gentile is that we try.

For business ethics teachers who come to GVV with a desire to learn more about this initiative and how they might integrate this approach into the courses they teach, the book is a wonderful introduction to this growing initiative. GVV

opens up possibilities to be explored further through looking more deeply into the GVV curriculum and experimenting in the classroom with different cases and exercises. Some may be inspired by the book to write their own cases to add to the GVV materials. The appendix contains valuable resources for use in and out of the classroom. While the cases and examples might be most relevant for graduate and executive level business classes, one can argue that it is never too early to develop the awareness and competence to stand up for one's values in the workplace. Some might therefore find opportunities to extend the insights of *Giving Voice to Values* to undergraduate courses as well.

Those who read GVV with an eye towards assessing its theoretical and empirical contributions to business ethics will find as noted earlier, both explicit (e.g. decision-making biases) and implicit (e.g., personal integrity) connections to relevant literatures. However, some fundamental questions and issues are not explored. What is it about the act of developing a script that increases the likelihood that individuals will enact their values? Gentile notes work on survivors and her own observations based on MBA essays, but the underlying dynamics remain unknown. Do scripts essentially act as a means to enhance behavioral commitment to an intended course of action? Do scripts serve as a prompt that activates important moral schemas that serve to influence our intentions and actions? These questions, and others business ethics scholars may open up after reading *Giving Voice to Values*, may encourage the kind of empirical work that could strengthen even further the GVV initiative.

Business ethicists may also wonder about the implications of one having voiced their values and *not* being successful in influencing others to change their behavior, especially if the issue at hand is one that involves unethical behavior. Having done the hard work to develop a script that allows us to voice our values, for example to a peer who has falsified an expense report, are we “off the moral hook” or are we obligated to “revise” our script and now adapt it with another individual/conversation in mind? These are of course difficult questions, but they are relevant ones and important to acknowledge and respond to as GVV develops over time.

Others, especially working professionals in a variety of roles, are likely to be inspired by Gentile's message and the stories and experiences she shares in *Giving Voice to Values*. They will also appreciate the practical focus of the book and its emphasis on developing scripts as tools that can be adapted to one's style and situation. Given their importance, I had hoped that Gentile would provide more detailed examples of fully developed scripts in the book, either directly in connection with the cases, or as examples in the appendix of the book. Gentile directs us to important building blocks for developing these scripts, e.g., reasons and rationalizations and key questions to address. I wanted to see her extend this further and give the reader a clearer, more practical sense of the actual language that might be used in a fully developed script.

Whether one is early in their working career, a high level executive, or a faculty member looking to engage students in a business ethics course, they will find real insight into a topic of great practical and theoretical importance—“How do we, in the midst of our working lives, find ways to stay true to our values?” In writing *Giving Voice to Values*, Mary Gentile invites her readers to look to those who have found a way to respond to this question and to learn from their experiences.