Framing a Life Story: An Exercise

Sometimes the hardest part of voicing our values is, ironically, accepting the image of ourselves that such efforts trigger.

Of course, this may seem counter-intuitive. We may think that the version of our life story we would squirm over is the one where we fail to act on our values. After all, isn’t that the heart of the so-called Wall Street Journal test of ethics: that is, the assertion that we should never do anything we would feel uncomfortable seeing on the front page of the Wall Street Journal (or the New York Times, or telling our parents, or…)?

And to a certain degree, the assumption on which this test is based is valid. That is, if we consider whether our actions are defensible to the wider public -- or if we think of someone whose respect we value and consider how they would react -- we will find a helpful “check and balance” for our decision-making. It’s a way of proactively creating a social context from which we may derive constructive “social proof” for our best instincts.¹

There are a couple limitations to this test, however. First, no one who takes actions that violate their values really expects to get caught or to have their decision reported in the paper: remember what research tells us about our tendency toward “over-optimism”.² But secondly, and more to the point here, despite our proactive efforts to create a positive social context outside the workplace for identifying the right thing to do, we are still strongly drawn to acceptance from the folks on whom we rely for our position, or with whom we spend the most time, or to whom we must defend our choice: that is, our workplace colleagues and supervisors.

And this acceptance – the perspectives that we hear or assume are prevalent from our professional colleagues – can have a very powerful impact on how we view our own decision to voice our values. Ironically, we may fear that a decision to voice our values – and therefore, not pursue an unethical but tempting course of action – will tag us as “naïve” or “unwilling to make the difficult calls” or “not

committed to the firm” or “not driven to succeed.” Sometimes it is precisely our act of values-based
courage that can be labeled negatively by our peers and even raise doubts within ourselves. Even when
we have created a positive context for defining our values, we may still find it difficult to act if we don’t
have a story to tell about our choices with which we are comfortable.3

Therefore, it may be useful to find a way to frame this decision to voice our values – and a story about
who we are – that we can feel comfortable with, not only in the Wall Street Journal or at home, but also
in the office.

**Assignment**

“Composing a Life Story” by Mary Catherine Bateson, from Willing to Learn: Passages of Personal

Think of a time when you have acted on your values but were still uncomfortable with the way that your
peers (or you) viewed that choice. What is the story they (or you) were telling about your decision? Why
were you uncomfortable with that story? How might you re-frame that story, perhaps using Bateson’s
ideas about “change” and/or “continuity”? (i.e., what are you keeping consistent within your life and
career, and/or what do you want to change or transform?)

**Discussion Questions:**

- Why do you think that the decision to act on one’s values is sometimes labeled as “naïve”?
- Why do you think that the individual who decides to act on his/her values is sometimes labeled
  as “unwilling to make the difficult calls” or “not committed to the firm”?
- Why do you think that the individual who decides to act on his/her values is sometimes labeled
  as “not driven to succeed”?
- Can you identify alternate stories or “frames” to use to change these labels, at least for
  yourself or for the case actor him or herself?

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3 See “Naivete or Boldness (B)” and “A Personal Struggle with the Definition of Success” for Giving Voice to Values case
illustrations of this phenomenon: www.GivingVoiceToValues.org

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