Giving Voice to Values: Brief Introduction[1]

Most of us want to bring our "whole selves" to work. Yet, experience and research demonstrate that many of us will encounter values conflicts in our careers, when the way we want to live and the things we want to accomplish seem in conflict with the expectations of our clients, our peers, our bosses and/or our organizations. The Giving Voice to Values curriculum is designed to help individuals learn to recognize, clarify, speak and act on their values when those conflicts arise.

The focus here is POST-decision making. It is not about deciding what the right thing *is*. Rather it is about how a manager raises these issues in an effective manner; what he/she needs to do and say in order to be heard; and how to try to correct an existing course of action when necessary.

Distinctive features of the *Giving Voice to Values* Curriculum include:

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 (which involves self-assessment and focus on 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.

Research and interviews reveal that there are many different ways to voice our values: looking for a win/win solution; changing the boss's mind through persuasion and logic; going over the boss's head within the organization; building coalitions of like-minded employees; and so on. But the pivotal moment is deciding to speak.

It's also important to understand that since there are so many different ways to voice our values, we can look for the approach that not only seems most likely to be effective in our particular situation, but also the one that is most comfortable, given our own personal style of communication and personality. Finally, there are things we can do to make it more likely that we will actually voice our values and that we will do so effectively: namely, pre-scripting, practice and coaching.

The point here is that just because we are addressing a question of values and ethics does not mean that we need to preach. Often, the very fact that a situation has an ethical component to it leads us to

[1] This material is part of the *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) curriculum. The Yale School of Management was the founding partner, along with the Aspen Institute, which also served as the incubator for GVV. From 2009 to 2015, GVV was hosted and supported by Babson College. Darden Business Publishing is pleased to present this material in its original form.

feel that we must gear ourselves up to be saints or even martyrs; in reality, we often just need to be competent and skillful. We can approach the communication challenge with the same analytical and personal capabilities that we would use in any other situation, whether it is a convincing our professor to give us an extension on our final paper or negotiating a later curfew. And as with other communication challenges, we will want to consider the needs and desires and emotional investments of the individuals to whom we are speaking, as opposed to focusing exclusively on our own. Re-framing "voice" as "dialogue," which includes a goodly dollop of "listening," is another important piece of the recipe.

It's also important to use the communication style with which we are most skilled and comfortable. For example, if our most effective style of communication is story-telling and the use of metaphor, we would likely want to play to our strengths, whether the topic is a moral conflict or not. Or, if we are uncomfortable with confrontation, we may choose to raise our objections through a line of careful questioning rather than assertion. Even if we are not convinced that our personal style will be most effective in a particular situation, we are most likely to speak if we start from the strengths we have, rather than attempting to be an entirely different type of person at a time of stress.

And of course, the power and influence of our context should not be underestimated. It's very hard to stand up against the majority or against an authority in any situation, let alone an ethically charged one. Nevertheless, we all know of times when we have seen individuals resist these pressures; we probably can think of some times when we have done so ourselves. Research and experience suggest that an explicit attempt to test our ideas with a diverse set of colleagues, and also perhaps to seek support from such a group both inside and outside the organization, may help us resist some of the unconscious influence. It may even help us find new ways of expressing our values that would not have occurred to us if we didn't seek out different perspectives.

Reasons and Rationalizations

When we encounter values conflicts in the workplace, we often face barriers that appear in the form of "reasons and rationalizations" for pursuing a particular course of action that can confound our best attempts to fulfill our own sense of organizational and personal purpose. These are the objections you hear from your colleagues when you try to point out an ethical problem in the way things are being done. Sometimes you don't even hear them because they are the unspoken assumptions – seeming truisms – of the organization.

It is extremely difficult to make a strong argument against the "prevailing winds" if you feel you are in the minority; or if you don't feel you have the time to come up with a workable alternative; or if you don't want to take the chance to present a half-baked response. So this curriculum is about creating a time and space to be in the majority, with sufficient time to come up with a fully-baked and pre-tested response to some of the most common challenges you are likely to face in your workplace.

In order to develop this ability we want to consider the challenging situation carefully and answer the following questions:

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? What are the *reasons and rationalizations* you need to address?
- What's at *stake* for the key parties, including those who disagree with you? What's at *stake* for you?
- What *levers* can you use to influence those who disagree with you?
- What is your most *powerful and persuasive response* to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address? To whom should the argument be made? When and in what context?

Interestingly, these questions are not asking us to apply ethical analysis. Rather they are all about understanding the reasons and motivations – both rational and emotional, organizational and personal, ethical and perhaps unethical – that guide the behavior and choices of those with whom we want to communicate.

What can make this approach particularly useful for tackling values-based conflicts is that, after a while, we will begin to recognize familiar categories of argument or reasons that we typically hear from someone defending an ethically questionable behavior. And, similarly, there are some useful questions, persuasive arguments and ways of framing our own role/purpose, and that of our organization, which can help us respond persuasively to these frequent arguments.

Finally, the very act of recognizing and naming the argument can reduce its power because it is no longer unconscious or assumed; we have made it discussable and even put it into play with equally, or hopefully stronger, counter-arguments. Choice becomes possible, and that is what this note is all about.

Let's take a moment to identify a few of the familiar categories of values conflict and categories of rationalization or argument, as well as some possible types of response – by way of illustration.

Rushworth Kidder suggests that most ethical dilemmas fall into four categories or patterns:

- "Truth versus loyalty"
- "Individual versus community"
- "Short term versus long term"
- "Justice versus mercy"[2]

You will note that Kidder is talking here about conflicting values, not values versus a lack of values. Many times, we *do* face situations where our own values are conflicted or torn. But sometimes, the conflict exists more in the way the dilemma is described or framed Thus, being prepared to recognize the ways that the framing of a choice may call different values into play can be useful.

For example, a colleague in our company sales team may use an appeal to personal loyalty as a way to persuade us to violate our commitment to integrity, when he or she asks us to keep silent about their deceptive sales tactics. But recognizing the pattern in this values conflict – that is, "truth versus loyalty" – may enable us to feel more prepared and certain of our response. The conflict moves from the particular and the immediate moment into a broader, more general context, and we begin to see it more clearly at this distance. Once the pattern is clear, we might recognize that our colleague is not showing the same loyalty to us (by respecting our personal integrity) that he or she is asking *from* us.

We can also consider the kinds of argument or rationalization that we often encounter in values conflicts. Some of the most common arguments include:

- Expected or Standard Practice: "Everyone does this, so it's really standard practice. It's even expected."
- Materiality: "The impact of this action is not material. It doesn't really hurt anyone."
- Locus of Responsibility: "This is not my responsibility; I'm just following orders here."
- Locus of Loyalty: "I know this isn't quite fair to the customer but I don't want to hurt my reports/team/boss/company."

[2] Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values Are Put To the Test* (New York: William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2005), page 89.

As we begin to recognize these categories of argument, we will become more adept at drawing upon responses to each of them. For example, the appeal to "expected or standard practice" is often an exaggeration. If everyone actually were doing "it" (whatever "it" is), what would be the consequences for business practice and customer trust? If the practice is really accepted, why are there so often laws, rules and/or policies against it? Would you be comfortable if everyone knew you were doing this? Who wouldn't you want to know? And so on.

With regard to the "materiality" argument, it becomes important to recognize that determinations of materiality are often ambiguous. Rather than being objective, they can depend on the method of measurement being employed.[3] Additionally, some practices are considered fraudulent, regardless of their relative size; that is, some things can't be just a little wrong.[4]

The question of "responsibility" is another well-considered topic in ethics literature, and numerous guidelines have been developed for assessing whether or not we are required to act.[5] The point here, though, is that this argument is often used when we know we are uncomfortable with a decision or action but are afraid of the consequences of voicing and acting upon that judgment. Therefore, the individual using this argument has already acknowledged that they don't like the situation, and this provides an opening for further discussion.

Finally, as noted earlier, the question and definition of loyalty can be framed in multiple ways. For example, are we "loyal" when we protect the financial bonus of our team this quarter or when we protect their long-term reputation and productivity?

We can also identify patterns of reasoning and levers that can be useful to understand in our efforts to voice our values. For example:

- Thinking in the long run as well as the short run.
- Considering the situation in terms of the group and the firm's wider purpose, rather than in terms of the immediate transaction alone. For example, what behavior enables them to serve their customers best; to manage themselves most efficiently; to manage themselves in the most honest manner; to align incentives of the firm, the sales team and the customers, etc.?
- Considering the assumed definition of "competitive advantage." This definition sometimes seems to follow the old joke about two lawyers pursued by a bear in the woods. One lawyer says to the other, "We'll never be able to outrun that bear," and the other replies, "I don't have to outrun that bear; I just have to outrun you." Implicit in this view of competitiveness is the assumption that the point of business is conquest, narrowly defined as outrunning the competitors (whether they are external or internal). This model often results in shortsighted, narrow conceptions of managerial purpose. It can be valuable to suggest an alternative model for competitiveness, based upon overall and long-term excellence, rather than merely "outrunning" the competition. This conception can also allow for consideration of *how* we achieve results, as well as whether we do so.
- Positioning oneself as an agent of "continuous improvement" as opposed to the source of complaint. For example, how can we improve this system of incentives and goals to maximize performance while discouraging "gaming" the system?
- Positioning oneself as a source of actionable alternatives rather than "thou shalt not's:"

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[3] Mary C. Gentile, "Discussions about Ethics in the Accounting Classroom: Student Assumptions and Faculty Paradigms," *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum, www.GivingVoiceToValues.org .

[4] "One Off Decisions" case, *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum, www.GivingVoiceToValues.org .

[5] "Reporting" module, page 11, *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum, www.GivingVoiceToValues.org .

- Pointing out addictive cycles that can cause greater and greater pressures and risks, leading to larger and larger values conflicts.
- Considering who we need and can attract as an ally in our efforts.
- Considering the costs to each affected party and looking for ways to recognize and mitigate these in order make our arguments more appealing.
- Assuming our audience members are **pragmatists** (as opposed to idealists or opportunists) and looking for ways to make it feasible for them to do the "right thing." This does not mean that they will never pay a price for their choices (sometimes such choices do mean sacrifice, at least in the short run), but it means that they will not feel as if they have been exploited for doing so. For example, if we want to ask our group to forego inappropriate revenue recognition it might help them to see that we are trying to address the problem at a systemic level, as well. After all, it is the organizational incentives that can encourage such choices.
- Assuming that our audience members are pragmatists, we will need to **counter the commonly held assumption of unethical behavior**: pragmatists often expect the lowest common denominator of behavior from those around them. In order to motivate individuals to step beyond this lowest common denominator, it is useful to share examples of effective managers who have made choices based on their sense of responsibility.

The point in identifying and delineating these different categories of argument and rationalization, as well as the categories of values dilemmas, is to help us recognize them when we encounter them; to understand the ways of thinking that produce them; and to be practiced in responding to them.