New Approach to Values-Driven Leadership Curriculum

“Giving Voice to Values is exactly what we need to help our students take action. Most ethics courses focus on hypothetical decision-making and determining what is the right thing to do. We know that “knowing” does not lead to “doing.” This initiative empowers students to speak through their actions.”
- Carolyn Woo, Dean, Notre Dame Mendoza College of Business

Despite four decades of good faith effort to teach Ethics in business schools, readers of the business press are still greeted on a regular basis with headlines about egregious excess and scandal. It becomes reasonable to ask why these efforts have not been working.

Business faculty in ethics courses spend a lot of time teaching theories of ethical reasoning and analyzing those big, thorny dilemmas — triggering what one professor called “ethics fatigue.” Some students find such approaches intellectually engaging; others find them tedious and irrelevant. Either way, sometimes all they learn is how to frame the case to justify virtually any position, no matter how cynical or self-serving. Utilitarianism, after all, is tailor made for a free market economy.

As for those “ethical dilemmas,” too often they are couched as choices that only a chief executive could love — because only a CEO would confront them. The average 30 year old MBA graduate is not likely to decide whether to run that pipeline across the pristine wilderness or whether to close the company’s manufacturing plant.

It’s not that ethical theory and high-level strategic dilemmas are not important; unquestionably they are. But they don’t help future managers and leaders figure out what to do the next — when a boss wants to alter the financial report, or their sales team applies pressure to misrepresent the capabilities of their product, or they witness discrimination against a peer — and these are the experiences that will shape their ability to take on the strategic, thorny ethical dilemmas in time.
The near term skill set revolves around what to say, to whom and how to say it when a the manager knows what he or she thinks is right when an ethical breech occurs — but doesn’t feel confident about how to act on his or her convictions. This overlooked but consequential skill set is the first step in building the ethical muscle. This is the purpose of the Giving Voice to Values program.

Scores of faculty at business schools from Yale to Notre Dame to MIT to Stanford to the Indian School of Business have tested and re-tested elements of the pilot curriculum. Our goal is to both build a conversation across the core curriculum (not only in ethics courses) — and provide the teaching aids and curriculum for — a new way of thinking about ethics education. Rather than a focus on ethical analysis, the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) curriculum focuses on ethical implementation and asks the question: “What if I were going to act on my values? What would I say and do? How could I be most effective?”

GVV is funded by Babson College, and was developed with The Aspen Institute Business & Society Program as incubator and as founding partner along with the Yale School of Management. Drawing on both the actual experience of business practitioners as well as cutting edge social science and management research, GVV fills a long-standing and critical gap in business education. It helps students identify the many ways that individuals can and do voice their values in the workplace, and it provides the opportunity to script and practice this voice in front of their peers.

GVV was developed by Mary C. Gentile PhD of Babson College. A veteran of Harvard Business School and pioneer in both ethics and diversity management curriculum, Gentile consults globally on management education and values-driven leadership. GVV is now being piloted in over 100 educational and executive settings on five continents. The book, Giving Voice To Values: How To Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right is available from Yale University Press (2010, www.MaryGentile.com).

Giving Voice to Values holds the promise to transform the foundational assumptions upon which the teaching of business ethics is based, and importantly, to equip future business leaders to not only know what is right — but how to make it happen.