

In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story

This 25-minute documentary draws from footage shot at The University of Texas at Austin when former lobbyist and convicted felon Jack Abramoff visited to talk about his life, politics, prison, and corrupt lobbying in Washington, D.C.

During the Bush Administration, Abramoff was the most influential lobbyist in Washington, D.C. He was also at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate. His excesses led to his downfall and that of Congress members with whom he was closely connected, including aides, business associates, government officials, and lawmakers.

As a video case, *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* includes the documentary, six short videos that each focus on a behavioral ethics bias as illustrated by Abramoff's story, and a written case study. The documentary can be used on its own to stimulate discussion about ethical issues and lapses, or used with its supporting materials to supplement topics taught in disciplines such as government, business, and economics. The video case is also appropriate for courses such as American studies, history, political science, law, journalism, communications, film, and psychology.

The main objective of the video case is to illustrate how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors—and even commit crimes—if they are not careful. It exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government and business, and explores the responsibility of the individual to organizations and communities. It also looks at the relationship between law and ethics, issues of power and privilege, and above all, the potential pitfalls any ambitious person faces when operating within a hyper-competitive environment.

Indeed, Abramoff is not someone who just “doesn't get” ethics. He believed he was a ‘moral lobbyist’ who fought hard on behalf of his clients. In retrospect, he can see where he went wrong and appears to regret his errors deeply. Yet, why could he not see this at the time?

The kind of decision-making errors that Abramoff made are the focus of a field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws upon psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things.

To understand six specific behavioral ethics concepts in more depth as they relate to Abramoff's story, watch the short videos that accompany this documentary: *Jack & Framing*, *Jack & Moral Equilibrium*, *Jack & Overconfidence Bias*, *Jack & Rationalizations*, *Jack & Role Morality*, and *Jack & Self-serving Bias*.



Many additional behavioral and general ethics concepts that appear in the documentary may be explored in greater detail in the *Concepts Unwrapped* videos. Watch *Conflict of Interest*, *Ethical Fading*, *Ethical Leadership, Part 1: Perilous at the Top*, *Framing*, *Legal Rights & Ethical Responsibilities*, *Moral Equilibrium*, *Moral Myopia*, *Overconfidence Bias*, *Role Morality*, and *Self-serving Bias* to learn more. To understand rationalizations, watch *Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent*, and *GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations* from the *GVV* video series.

The case study on this page, “Abramoff: Lobbying Congress,” details Abramoff’s lobbying activities and the scandal that ended his career. Another case study, “*Cheney v. U.S. District Court*,” explores conflict of interest in government. For a case study about ethical fading during the Watergate scandal, read “Krogh & the Watergate Scandal.”

Terms related to this video case and defined in our ethics glossary include: behavioral ethics, bounded ethicality, conflict of interest, corruption, diffusion of responsibility, ethical fading, fundamental attribution error, framing, groupthink, in-group/out-group, integrity, moral agent, moral equilibrium, moral myopia, moral reasoning, overconfidence bias, role morality, self-serving bias, and tangible/abstract.

Discussion Questions for In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story

1. What are the key points that this documentary raises?
2. What did Abramoff do that was unethical, even if legal? Why were these actions unethical?
3. The documentary focuses on Abramoff’s role as a lobbyist within a system that is, he argues, more corrupt than ever. To what degree do individuals have a responsibility to act ethically within a morally corrupt system?
4. The documentary raises the point that white-collar crime is generally considered far less problematic than hard crime. Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the long-term consequences of white-collar crimes for individuals, families, society?
5. Do you agree with the UT officials who decided to bring Abramoff to campus in order to speak to students and create this film? What ethical issues were involved in their decision-making process?
6. Compare Abramoff’s situation with the Lance Armstrong scandal. What similarities can you identify? What differences? What character traits do you think led each man to act illegally and unethically? Are their actions representative of ‘everything wrong’ (i.e. hunger for power, money, fame) with American society?
7. Do you think Abramoff’s success as a lobbyist supports the idea that politicians are corrupt or easily corruptible? Should we place blame on Abramoff and the politicians or the system in which they operate? If the system is fundamentally flawed, is it fair for individual lobbyists or politicians to pay the price?

8. In the film, Abramoff notes that he thought he was the ‘moral lobbyist’? Why does he think so and do you agree with him?
9. Abramoff still owes the government \$44 million in restitution. Some argue that he is only speaking out against corruption to get past this debt and regain his prior fame and fortune. Others believe his claim that he is in a unique position to expose the corruption of the system. Do you believe Abramoff genuinely regrets his prior actions and is now working hard at improving how our government operates? Or do you think he is just ‘out for himself’? Does it matter whether he’s sincere if his actions lead to important reforms?
10. Do you think you could survive in today’s world if you promised yourself that you would always act honorably? Do you think such a life is possible?

Additional Resources

Books about the lobbying scandal include Jack Abramoff’s own account, “Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America’s Most Notorious Lobbyist” (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, “Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Movies about the scandal include a documentary, *Casino Jack and the United States of Money* (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, *Casino Jack* (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using “Ethics Unwrapped” Videos and Educational Materials\).”](#)

For more resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics.”](#)

Another article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?”](#)

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases." *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.