

In It to Win: Jack & Framing

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept of framing in the context of the story of former lobbyist and convicted felon Jack Abramoff. 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.

Framing describes how our responses to situations, including our ethical judgments, are impacted simply by how those situations may be posed or viewed. For example, people prompted to think of an issue as an ethical issue will tend to make more ethical decisions than people prompted to think of that same issue as a “business” issue. For more details and examples of this concept, watch *Framing*. To learn about framing effects caused by our own pre-existing points of view, watch *Self-serving Bias*. To understand how relative tangible and abstract components of a situation impact how we frame that issue, watch *Tangible & Abstract*.

The kinds of decision-making errors that are the subject of *Jack & Framing* and the other five shorts in this video case 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.

This video draws from footage shot at The University of Texas at Austin when Abramoff visited campus to talk about his life and corrupt lobbying in Washington, D.C. It is part of a video case that includes a 25-minute documentary, *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*, six short videos that focus on specific behavioral ethics biases illustrated by Abramoff’s story, and a written case study. The documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government and illustrates how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors—and even commit crimes.

To learn more about the scandal that ended Abramoff’s lobbying career, read the case study on this page. For a case study on framing in business, read “Selling Enron,” which illustrates how the energy company Enron profited greatly from deceitful framing practices, but at a dire cost. For a case study that explores framing complex issues, read “Arctic Offshore Drilling,” which illustrates how competing groups have each framed the debate over expanded oil drilling off the coast of Alaska to align with their agendas.

Terms related to this short video and defined in our ethics glossary include: behavioral ethics, conflict of interest, framing, moral myopia, self-serving bias, and tangible/abstract.

Discussion Questions for Jack & Framing

- 1) Can you explain framing in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?
- 2) How does framing apply to Jack Abramoff? What examples from his story can you cite to support your argument?

- 3) Can you think of an example from your own life where you or someone else fell victim to framing?
- 4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of framing in your own life or decision-making?

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.

Transcript of Narration - *Framing (From the Concepts Unwrapped Series)*

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““Framing” refers to the fact that people’s judgments, including their ethical judgments, are affected just by how a question is posed or viewed; for example, people prompted to think of an issue as an ethical issue will tend to make more ethical decisions than people prompted to think of that same issue as a “business” issue.

In any kind of decision-making, context counts. The simple reframing of a situation or question can produce a totally different answer from the same person. For example, people would rather buy a hamburger made of meat labeled 75% fat free than meat labeled 25% fat. In fact, when questioned, these people will tell you that the 75% fat-free burger tastes better than the 25% fat burger, even though the burgers are identical.

When NASA was deciding whether to launch the ill-fated space shuttle Challenger, Morton Thiokol’s engineers at first opposed the launch on safety grounds. But when their general manager instructed the engineers to “put on their management hats,” he reframed the decision from one focusing on safety to one focusing on dollars and cents. The engineers then unfortunately changed their decision.

We need to look beyond the obvious frame of reference in business – “will this be a profitable decision?” – and consider our actions from a broader perspective like “how will this look when it’s reported on the front page of the newspaper?”

Decisions made by business people often occur in a context where subjective factors predominate, and the framing of an issue is particularly influential. In Enron’s declining days, the company attempted to save money by encouraging employees to minimize travel expenses. An Enron employee later wrote that he intentionally flouted the new policy. While this seems like a clear ethical lapse, in the employee’s mind, he deserved to stay in the most expensive hotels and to eat at the best restaurants because of how very hard he was working. He framed the issue in terms of his narrow self-serving interests, not in the broader ethical context of adhering to company policy.

CFOs and accounting personnel at Enron, HealthSouth, and other scandal-ridden companies didn’t need a philosophy course to help them figure out that their manipulation of financial statements was unethical. Their problem was that at the time of their actions, their frame of reference was loyalty to the company and to the company’s goal of maximizing stock price. Had those employees been able to think in terms of the bigger ethical picture – for example, the impact of their actions on other people’s pension funds – they might have acted differently.”