Conformity Bias

Questions for classroom discussions

1) Can you think of a time when you did something just because everyone else was doing it—even when it didn’t feel quite right to you? Do you regret it now?

2) It was recently observed that “cheating is contagious.” Does that sound true to you? Why or why not? If it is true, why might this be the case?

3) Loyalty is generally considered a good quality. When a group to which you owe loyalty seems to be making a decision that seems unethical to you, how should you go about trying to balance your loyalty to the group against your own ethical integrity? Have you had an experience like that? If so, how did you resolve it?

4) Can you explain how “groupthink” works? Can you think of a time when you have been subject to groupthink?

5) In the Harry Potter books, Albus Dumbledore told Harry: “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.” Do you have advice for people regarding how they can muster such bravery? Any personal experience to share?

6) How can an organization that wants its employees to make decisions in accordance with their own moral compass encourage them to do so?
Additional Resources


Additional Note

This video introduces students to concepts explored in more detail in several other “Concepts Unwrapped” videos on the Ethics Unwrapped website, as well as to the “In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story” documentary, and its accompanying short videos. Anyone who watches all or even a good part of these videos will have a pretty solid introduction to the concept of behavioral ethics.

Behavioral ethics is a new field drawing on behavioral psychology, cognitive science and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things.

Behavioral ethics may be the “next big thing” in ethics education. N.Y.U. recently asked Prof. Jonathan Haidt, whose research is a major part of the new learning in behavioral ethics, to create a behavioral ethics course there. And John Walsh, who helped create the Office of Compliance Inspections and Examinations at the SEC, recently wrote in *Corporate Counsel* that the “ultimate promise of behavioral ethics...is that it provides pragmatic tools that have been demonstrated to work.”

A somewhat dated, but still serviceable introductory article on teaching behavioral ethics is: Robert A. Prentice, Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases, 1 Journal of Business Ethics Education 57-74 (2004), which is accessible through Google Scholar.

Transcript of Narration
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Parents seldom accept as an excuse their child’s plea of “Hey everyone else is doing it.” However, psychological studies demonstrate that those same parents, and everyone else, tend to take their cues for proper behavior in most social contexts from the actions of others. This pressure is called the conformity bias.

Psychologist Solomon Asch found that when he asked subjects to tell which of three lines is the same length as a fourth line, no one had difficulty unless they were placed in group with Asch’s confederates who gave obviously wrong answers. Under those conditions, almost all the subjects found it very painful to give the obviously correct answer in contradiction to the strangers’ wrong answers. In fact, most participants gave an obviously incorrect answer at least once during the study.

This bias to conform is much greater, of course, when the others in the group are co-employees and/or friends, or when the correct answer is not right there in black and white – as it was in the Asch Study – but is instead a subjective—like an ethical questions.

An employee at the accounting firm KPMG challenged the ethics of tax shelters that the firm was selling. He received a simple e-mail that said: “You’re either on the team or off the team.”

Well everyone wants to be on the team. We all realize that loyalty is generally an important virtue. But it causes a pressure to conform and this pressure to conform, it can been argued, helped cause Ford employees to sell the Pinto despite awareness of its gas tank dangers, and helped A. H. Robins employees to continue to sell the Dalkon Shield contraceptive IUD despite knowing its ghastly medical consequences.
The impairment of individual decision making known as “groupthink” – where people deciding in groups often make more extreme decisions than any individual member initially supports – can exacerbate the conformity bias. It can be reasonably argued that loyalty and groupthink helped Morton Thiokol employees to remain silent about known O-ring dangers that caused the Challenger space shuttled disaster.

Psychological and organizational pressures can cause even people with good intentions to lie or otherwise act unethically. Good character isn’t always sufficient. As Albus Dumbledore told Harry Potter, “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”