Framing
Questions for classroom discussions

1) Studies show that people primed to think about business profits will make different choices than people facing the same decision who have been primed to think about acting ethically. Can you explain how that might affect you in your work life?

2) Can you think of a situation where you made a decision that you regret and probably would have chosen differently had you looked at the choice in a different way?

3) How do politicians and advertisers use framing to channel people’s decision?

4) How might framing adversely affect your ethical decision making in your projected workplace?

5) How can you work to ensure that ethical considerations stay in your frame of reference when you make decisions in your career and your life?

6) How can firms help their employees to keep ethical considerations in mind when they make decisions?
Additional Teaching 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 in the documentary “In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story” 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 detailed article with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics is Prentice, Robert. 2014. “Teaching Behavioral Ethics.” Journal of Legal Studies Education 31 (2): 325-365; and may be downloaded here:

Additional Resources


Transcript of Narration

Written by Professor Robert Prentice

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.