Incrementalism
Questions for classroom discussions

1) Psychologist Dan Ariely says, “The first dishonest act is the most important one to prevent.” Why does he say that? Do you agree?

2) Can you think of a situation where you were a victim of the slippery slope phenomenon?

3) Have you seen a friend or read about someone in the newspaper who started cutting little corners and was soon in big trouble?

4) Cynthia Cooper, whistleblower of the infamous WorldCom financial fraud, wrote: “People don’t wake up and say, ‘I think I’ll become a criminal today.’ Instead, it’s often a slippery slope and we lose our footing one step at a time.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

5) Clayton Christensen, a professor at the Harvard Business School, has stated that one of the most important lessons of his life is that it is easier to do the right thing a hundred percent of the time than ninety-eight percent of the time.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

6) What can people do to prevent a mistake from snowballing down the slippery slope?
**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

People tend to believe that they have good moral character, and therefore they're confident that that when they face issues with moral dimensions they’ll make good choices. However, Cynthia Cooper who was the whistleblower in the infamous WorldCom fraud wrote that, “People don’t wake up one day and say, ‘Today’s the day I think I’ll start my life of crime.’ Instead, it’s often a slippery slope we slowly lose our ethical footing one step at a time.” This process is what behavioral ethicists call “incrementalism.”

As an example, think about the Abu Ghraib prison site, and the mistreatment of some of the inmates there. A female wrote: “In the beginning, you see somebody naked and you see underwear on their head and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s pretty bad — I can’t believe I just saw that.’ And then you go to bed and you come back the next day and you see something worse. Well, it seems like the day before wasn’t so bad.”
This is the slippery slope at work. And if we're not careful we can easily go from minor transgressions in our workplace such as taking a few office supplies home for personal use or lightly padding our expense account, to more serious transgressions.

Francesca Gino and Max Bazerman who are psychologists at the Harvard School of Business refer to it as the “boiling frog syndrome.” It’s said that if you throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, he’ll jump out. But if you place him in a pot of cool water and gradually turn up the heat, he will slowly boil to death. I don’t think Gino and Bazerman actually experimented on frogs, but they observed humans, and found that we unconsciously lower the bar over time through small changes in ethicality.

Think about it most multi-million dollar securities frauds start with executives fudging fairly small numbers but over time those numbers grow through incrementalism. An officer who was caught up in the Enron scandal later said “You did it once, it smelled bad. He did it again, it didn’t smell bad.” That’s incrementalism at work.