In It To Win: Jack & Framing

In It To Win: Jack & Framing introduces the concept of framing, which 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 that people prompted to think of that same issue as a “business” issue.

Questions for classroom discussions:

In It To Win: 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 Teaching Note

The instructional resources in this series include a feature documentary, *In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* (25 minutes), and six short videos (approx. 5 minutes each) that concentrate on specific decision-making errors people tend to make, as illustrated by Jack Abramoff’s story.

These decision-making errors are part of a new field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws on behavioral psychology, cognitive science, and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. 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:


*In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* draws from footage shot when Jack Abramoff visited The University of Texas at Austin campus in spring 2012 to talk about his experiences and his life as well as corrupt lobbying in Washington, which he is now dedicated to reforming. Jack Abramoff is not someone who just “doesn’t get” ethics; rather, he is a smart man, a family man, a religious man, and a man who thought he was one of the “good guys” as he battled for his clients. In retrospect, he can see where he went wrong and appears to regret his errors deeply. Why couldn’t he see it at the time?

Most obviously, this documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government, business, and economics. But beyond those areas, it is also appropriate for use in courses on journalism, film, policy, American studies, history, law, communications, and psychology. The film explores the ethics of documentary film-making, the responsibility of the individual to organizations and communities, 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.

See the Transcript of *Framing* below (from our Concepts Unwrapped Series) for more on the concept of framing.
Background on Jack Abramoff

During the Bush Administration, super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff was perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Washington D.C. His excesses led to his downfall and that of Congressmen with whom he was closely connected, including Tom Delay (R-Tex.) who left Washington in disgrace and Bob Ney (R-Ohio) who went to prison.

Because of the access that Abramoff had to members of the Bush administration and their allies, he was at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate. For more information about Jack Abramoff’s life and career, see his Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Abramoff.

Books about the 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).

Transcript of Framing (Concepts Unwrapped Series)
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

“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 that 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.