In It To Win: Jack & Role Morality

In It To Win: Jack & Role Morality introduces the concept of role morality, which refers to the tendency people have to use different moral standards as they play different “roles” in society. For example, people may take ethically questionable actions in their role as loyal employees at work to advance our company’s profit goals that they would never take at home to put money in their own pockets.

Questions for classroom discussions:

In It To Win: Jack & Role Morality

1) Can you explain role morality in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?

2) How does role morality 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 role morality?

4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of Role Morality 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.


*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 *Role Morality* below (from our Concepts Unwrapped series) for more on this concept.
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 Role Morality (Concepts Unwrapped Series)
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Sometimes organizational and psychological pressures cause even good people to act unethically. In a lawsuit over a car wreck, an insurance company representing the defendant demanded the right to have its doctor examine the plaintiff. When he did, the doctor found that the plaintiff had a life-threatening brain aneurysm. Because it would have disadvantaged the insurance company’s defense, the doctor did not tell the plaintiff, who did not find out for two more years. Why would a doctor keep this vital information from an injured man? Obviously, the doctor viewed his job as protecting the insurance company’s financial interests, Hippocratic Oath be damned. This is an example of something ethicists call role morality.
Role morality has been defined as feeling that you have permission to harm others in ways that would be wrong if it weren’t for the role that you are playing. Role morality often involves people acting in ways that they would view as clearly unethical if they were acting on their own behalf, but because they are acting on behalf of their employer or a client, they view their actions as permissible. In a detailed study of a corporation, sociologist Robert Jackall found that many employees segregated their personal beliefs from the ethics of their workplace. He quoted an officer as saying: “What is right in the corporation is not what is right in a man’s home or in his church. What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That’s what morality is in the corporation.” When people check their personal moral code at the door, they can suddenly become capable of doing horrendous things. After World War II, Albert Speer, Hitler’s Minister of Armaments and War Production, said that he viewed his role as an “administrator.” As a mere administrator, he convinced himself that matters relating to human beings, including, of course, the Holocaust, were not his concern. This man checked his humanity at the door.

A study by professors at Brigham Young University found that family businesses are more likely to act in a socially responsible way than bigger companies. The family name is on the door and officers want to act in ways that reflect well upon their family. However, people working in bigger corporations find it easier to separate their personal feelings of how business should be done from their role inside the organization. We cannot leave behind our personal beliefs as to right and wrong when we walk through our office doors.