Moral Muteness
Questions for classroom discussions

1) Why shouldn’t the client always be right except in situations that involve illegal behavior?

2) Think of a time when you should have spoken up about something that conflicted with your values, but instead you remained silent. What rationalizations did you use to justify not speaking up? What were the consequences of your not speaking up?

3) Think of a time when you did speak up about something that conflicted with your values. What motivated you to speak up? It often takes courage to speak up; what enabled you to have the courage to speak up?

4) In the video, a fraternity member described a situation in which he did not speak up to object to hazing in his fraternity because the people doing the hazing were his friends, and he did not want any harm to come to his friends. What would a real friend do in a situation like the one he described? What would he say; what arguments would he make?

5) In the video, a young woman referred to a friend of hers who writes essays for other students for money, which is academic fraud. What would a real friend do in a situation such as this? What would a real friend say; what arguments would she use?

6) The video makes a distinction between a “please-o-holic” and a trusted business adviser. What do you see as the characteristics of a trusted business advisor? (Note that the components of trust are typically competence, integrity, and compassion.)
Additional Teaching Note

The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness, and Moral Imagination—are intended to be used together. Moral myopia and moral muteness often reinforce each other, and breaking free of moral myopia and moral muteness can enable one to develop moral imagination. These concepts and many of the rationalizations that underpin them are described and documented in a Journal of Advertising article by Minette E. Drumwright and Patrick E. Murphy, “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness and Moral Imagination” (2004, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 7-24).

One way to teach the Moral Trilogy is to stop the videos at certain points and ask some of the discussion questions related to the specific situations referenced. For example, two different students talk about situations involving sharing answers for schoolwork. The instructor could stop the video at one of these points and ask questions such as, “Does this go on at our university? What kinds of rationalizations are used? Is there moral myopia or moral muteness about this topic? How would one overcome them?”

In teaching the videos on moral myopia and moral muteness, instructors can often tie in with current events about scandals that likely involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. One example involves the recent allegations of academic fraud at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) and the criminal indictment of Professor Julius Nyang’oro, long-time chairman of the African American Studies Department at UNC. Nyang’oro was indicted for teaching dozens of barely existent or questionably led classes, including one lecture class that never met in which 18 out of 19 students were members of the UNC football team. He also presided over a department in which more than 500 grades were illicitly changed often with professors’ signatures forged. If the allegations are true, a scandal such as this could not have occurred absent moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. As another example, Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong for years adamantly denied that he had taken performance-enhancing drugs, and then in 2013, he confessed on the Oprah Winfrey show that he had indeed taken drugs. Armstrong and those who supported him in the cover up most likely suffered from forms of moral myopia and moral muteness. Likewise, Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky’s sexual harassment of young boys and the related cover up likely involved moral myopia and/or moral muteness.
on the part of a number of parties, including highly respected coaches and university officials.

Examples of moral myopia and moral muteness that involve illegal behavior are often some of the most dramatic. However, it is important to emphasize that moral myopia and moral muteness do not always lead to criminal behavior, and they are not limited to situations that involve breaking the law. For example, one could imagine that the recent disastrous roll out of the Obamacare website involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of individuals.

The videos on moral myopia and moral muteness tie in nicely and reinforce the concepts and ideas in the Ethics Unwrapped film, In It to Win, about the infamous lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was convicted of a number of crimes and served time in a federal prison. In the film, Abramoff asserted that he did not realize that he was involved in highly illegal and unethical lobbying activities as he was committing the crimes, indicating a severe form of moral myopia. He also said that he did not talk about these activities with people who might have provided him with ethical counsel, indicating that he had moral muteness.

The rationalizations that support moral myopia and moral muteness illustrate the perceptual biases of behavioral ethics, which are illustrated by a number of Ethics Unwrapped videos, such as those on the conformity bias, obedience to authority, the self-serving bias, and tangible and abstract. Many of these biases are described in a forthcoming article by Robert Prentice, “Teaching Behavioral Ethics” in the Journal of Legal Studies Education (2014). The Moral Trilogy videos can be used in conjunction with the behavioral ethics videos and Prentice’s article.

Moral imagination is illustrated in two forms in the video: 1) finding a way to be both ethical and successful (e.g., the advertising agency CEO who resigned a big client rather than do something unethical that the client was insisting that he do and found a way to cut costs, pitch new business, and keep everyone employed) and 2) finding a way to make money and serve society (e.g., TOMS Shoes’ one-for-one donation; for each pair of TOMS shoes that is purchased, the company donates a pair to someone in need). It can be helpful to make a distinction between these two forms of moral imagination; the former involves integrity, while the latter involves corporate social responsibility.
Drumwright and Murphy (2004) found that advertising practitioners who used moral imagination worked in advertising agencies that encouraged moral sensitivity. In these agencies, organizational values related to ethics had been articulated and broadly embraced. Advertising practitioners in these agencies often talked about ethical issues with their co-workers and their clients, and they viewed providing ethics counsel to their clients as part of their roles as trusted business advisors.

The ideas related to mitigating moral myopia and moral muteness and encouraging moral imagination are very much in sync with the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach created by Mary C. Gentile. See the Ethics Unwrapped video series on Giving Voice to Values and Gentile’s website of GVV cases and readings. Four GVV cases were written by Drumwright and some of her students to help undergraduates recognize moral myopia and moral muteness and the rationalizations that can support them and to help them understand how to give voice to their values and exercise moral imagination (See “Part-time Job with a Full-time Challenge”, “Market Research Deception”, “Student Privileges with Strings Attached”, and “Online Identities (A) & (B).” Cases such as these can be used in conjunction with the Moral Trilogy videos.

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/teachingresearch/gvv/Pages/curriculum.aspx
Additional Resources

**Academic Articles:**


**Cases:**

See the Giving Voice To Values (GVV) Curriculum for cases that provide evidence of Moral Myopia and Moral Muteness. All GVV curriculum materials are free to instructors and students here:

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Home.Aspx

Especially see the GVV cases written by Minette E. Drumwright and her students, “Part-Time Job With A Full-Time Challenge,” “Market Research Deception,” “Student Privileges With Strings Attached,” and “Online Identities (A) & (B).”

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Curriculum.Aspx
News Stories On Scandals:


http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/earlylead/wp/2013/01/14/a-brief-history-of-lance-armstrong-denying-doping-allegations-video/

Transcript of Narration
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We know problems occur when people don’t see ethical issues. And there are also problems that develop when people know deep down that something is wrong, but they find some way to rationalize not speaking up about it. Scholars, Frederick Bird and James Waters, refer to this as “moral muteness.” Moral Muteness is when people either don’t voice moral sentiments or they communicate in ways that obscure their moral beliefs and commitments.

In a study of people working in advertising agencies, Patrick Murphy and I found that moral muteness was supported by a number of rationalizations, and we think that these rationalizations are applicable to business more generally. For example, one common rationalization was that ethics is bad for business. As one person said:

If you bring up ethics, people will think that you don’t have business savvy. They say, “If you’re going to talk like that, go run a church.”

The fact of the matter is, when push comes to shove, many people would prefer to win than to be ethical, but this is often a short-term approach that can actually hurt both the individual and the organization in the long term.
Moral muteness can be supported by another kind of rationalization that involves a competing goal -- something that seems like a higher good that trumps moral concerns. But usually, the analysis of the other goal is superficial. For example, the rationalization “The client is always right.” can lead to a please-o-holic syndrome in which you don’t tell your client things they don’t want to hear—like moral concerns. There is a big difference in a trusted business advisor and a please-o-holic. Trusted business advisors sometimes have to give uncomfortable advice in order to do their jobs well. Please-o-holics may feel like they are doing their jobs well in the short term, but in the long run, research shows that a different type of relationship is more productive and more profitable.

One way to avoid moral muteness obviously is to make a habit of talking about ethical issues with people whom we trust. When we raise concerns, we can position ourselves as someone who is trying to help the organization, to protect it from problems, rather than as someone who is trying to slap hands, or judge. Often making persuasive arguments by illustrating the potential consequences for individuals and for the organization can be helpful. And it’s important to view our role as that of a trusted business advisor – an indispensable professional in any organization.