

## Framing

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as framing. Framing describes how our responses to situations, including our ethical judgments, are impacted just by how those situations may be posed or viewed. For example, we may frame an ethical issue to benefit our own perspective or beliefs. Or, the framing of an issue in the news may affect how we respond to it depending on how tangible or abstract the problem may seem to us.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Self-serving Bias* and *Tangible & Abstract*. For a closer look at how framing affected the behavior of former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, watch *In It to Win: Jack & Framing*.

The case studies on this page offer examples of how framing can cause significant environmental and economic effects. “Arctic Offshore Drilling” describes how groups with competing interests have framed the debate over expanded oil drilling off the coast of Alaska. “Selling Enron” illustrates how the energy company profited greatly from deceitful framing practices, but at a dire cost. For a related case study that explores the consequences of false framing, read “*A Million Little Pieces*.”

Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in *Concepts Unwrapped*, as well as in the video case study *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*. Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.



## Discussion Questions

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 Resources

Cruver, Brian. 2002. *Anatomy of Greed: The Unshredded Truth from an Enron Insider*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.

Herbert, Wray. 2010. *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks.

McDonald, Allan J., and James R. Hansen. 2009. *Truth, Lies, and O-Rings: Inside the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics.”](#)

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?”](#)

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

### **Transcript of Narration**

*Written and Narrated by*

**Robert Prentice, J.D.**  
**Business, Government & Society Department**  
**McCombs School of Business**  
**The University of Texas at Austin**

“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.”