

Abramoff: Reformed Convict or the Ultimate Persuader?

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The former lobbyist, on campus to discuss ethical decision making, doesn't see himself as especially good or bad: "Like everybody, [I'm] somewhere in between, being tugged by both inclinations and aspiring to be better and being disappointed when I'm not."

In the movie, the villain, wearing a suit and brushing his teeth, looks into the mirror and delivers a scenery-chewing, profanity-peppered monologue.

"I will not allow my family to be slaves. I will not allow the world I touch to be vanilla. You say I'm selfish? [Expletive deleted.] I give back. I give back plenty. You say I got a big ego? [Expletive deleted.] I'm humbly grateful for the wonderful gifts that I've received here in America, the greatest country on this planet. I'm Jack Abramoff. And oh, yeah, I work out every day."

That's the Hollywood version of the man, as played by actor Kevin Spacey. The real **Jack Abramoff** struck a very different tone when he appeared before a university audience on May 2 to participate in a discussion about ethics, entitled, "You Don't Know Jack: A Conversation with Jack Abramoff."

Unlike the film version, the real Abramoff was soft spoken and seemingly apologetic for the misdeeds that landed him behind bars for more than three

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years. (He also said he doesn't work out every day.) Preceded by a clip from the film "Casino Jack," the conversation — moderated by **Robert Prentice** ^[1], chair of the Department of Business, Government, and Society ^[2], and **Minette Drumwright**, professor in the College of Communication ^[3] — often returned to a theme: Despite what Hollywood portrayals might suggest, people who commit ethical and legal lapses are more like us than we would like to believe.

Jack Abramoff doesn't consider himself to be a villain. "I'm somebody who went off course and did things that I regret...But I don't think I'm a bad person," he said. "Unfortunately, I'm not a saint and I'm not necessarily a devil. Like everybody, [I'm] somewhere in between, being tugged by both inclinations and aspiring to be better and being disappointed when I'm not."

That means the rest of us may have something to learn from people like Abramoff. Indeed, he visited the Forty Acres to be filmed for a segment of the McCombs video series project "Ethics Unwrapped ^[4]," which aims to encourage dialogue in classrooms around the topic of ethical decision making. What lessons can he provide? According to Abramoff, individuals need to take a two-pronged approach that addresses both legal and ethical considerations:

- **Learn the laws and rules — and follow them.** Rather than thinking the laws are a minor roadblock to overcome on the way to accomplishing your goals, realize they do apply to you.
- **Don't do anything you'd be embarrassed about.** Regardless of the laws, if friends and family saw what you were doing on YouTube, would your actions embarrass you?

Abramoff admitted that despite his past tendency to "overdo" things while simultaneously justifying his actions, he now realizes that problems arise when we accept nothing less than total success.

"Half of life is figuring out what to do after you lose," he said.

Still, it's impossible to know whether Abramoff is truly reformed or just selling himself as reformed. As Drumwright pointed out, Abramoff is a man once described by a co-worker as someone who could "charm a dog off a meat truck." It's exactly that type of charisma that makes him potentially capable of disingenuously presenting himself in a way that supports his new, contrite image.

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But he maintains that he is reformed, and that his reasons for getting back into the public eye — efforts to help people learn from his mistakes and to change Washington for the better — aren't the actions of someone soliciting votes or engaging in a popularity contest. "You can't know what's in my heart unless you're God or you're me," Abramoff said.

Most of the questions lobbed his way didn't press Abramoff particularly hard. One audience member, however, caught Abramoff somewhat off guard when he asked whether the former lobbyist could have done as much good for his clients had he not acted as he did. Although he stressed that breaking the law was unnecessary, Abramoff acknowledged that he may not have been able to succeed for his clients if he hadn't acted contemptuously within the law.

"In that atmosphere, fighting the fights we were fighting, against the people we were fighting — who were using money the way we used money — I don't think we would have prevailed for" our clients, he said. "That's the tragedy of Washington."