GGV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations

GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations introduces the last principle of "Giving Voice to Values" (GVV). By anticipating the typical reasons and rationalizations given for ethically questionable behavior, we are able to identify and prepare well-reasoned responses. Mary Gentile suggests that there are common arguments and rationalizations that are used to defend unethical or questionable practices, whether in business or in our wider lives. These rationalizations are predictable and vulnerable to reasoned response. Preparing ahead of time to respond to them can make it easier to address ethical problems.

To learn more about values systems and how they vary from culture to culture, watch *Fundamental Moral Unit* and *All is Not Relative*. For complimentary approaches to GVV that also offer methods for voicing values and making ethical decisions, watch the four-part *Being Your Best Self* videos, which include *Part 1: Moral Awareness*, *Part 2: Moral Decision Making*, *Part 3: Moral Intent*, and *Part 4: Moral Action*. To learn about pervasive social and organizational biases that inhibit voicing values, watch *Moral Muteness* and *Moral Myopia*. To discover how voicing values can contribute to professional and personal success, watch *Moral Imagination*.

The case studies on this page illustrate different ways in which individuals or groups give voice to their values. "Pao & Gender Bias" examines the debate Ellen Pao generated in the venture capital and tech industries when she filed a lawsuit against her employer on grounds of gender discrimination. "Freedom of Speech on Campus" explores how, in the wake of racially motivated offenses at Yale and the University of Missouri, student protesters voiced their values and sparked debate over the roles of free speech, deliberation, and tolerance on campus. "Defending Freedom of Tweets?" takes a look at the backlash Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall received from fans after he tweeted a criticism of the celebration of the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. "Full Disclosure: Manipulating Donors" examines the difficult position a student intern was in and how she struggled to voice her values.

Terms related to this video and defined in our ethics glossary include: ethics, behavioral ethics, bounded ethicality, conformity bias, diffusion of responsibility, fundamental attribution error, moral emotions, moral equilibrium, morals, moral reasoning, obedience to authority, rationalizations, role morality, self-serving bias, values, and virtue ethics.

The GVV Approach

The "Giving Voice to Values" (GVV) video series summarizes the key points of *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*, written by Mary Gentile with support from the Yale

School of Management and the Aspen Institute. The GVV videos may be watched individually or sequentially. The series will be most useful if viewed in its entirety and with the introductory video.

GVV was created for business ethics programs, but its lessons are broad and apply to all professionals in every field including fine arts, liberal arts, communication studies, social and natural sciences, engineering, education, social work, and medicine. The GVV series can serve as a springboard for further discussion of ethics and values as they pertain to individuals' professional and personal lives.

GVV identifies the many ways that individuals can – and do – voice their values in the workplace. It teaches people how to build the "moral muscles" necessary to do so, and details the strategies people can use to find the motivation, skill, and confidence to "give voice to their values."

The goal of GVV is to act consistently with our most deeply held convictions about right and wrong. Research and experience demonstrate that values conflicts will inevitably occur in our professional and personal lives. So, when what we believe and want to accomplish seems to be in opposition to the demands of others (peers, supervisors, organizations, etc.), the ability to successfully voice our values and navigate these differences is crucial. This is the starting point for the GVV curriculum.

GVV consists of seven principles, or pillars, that represent ways of thinking about values, our identity, and our own capabilities. The seven pillars of GVV are: *Values*, *Choice*, *Normalization*, *Purpose*, *Self-Knowledge & Alignment*, *Voice*, and *Reasons & Rationalizations*. Each video in the GVV series introduces and explains one of the GVV pillars.

Gentile also describes the factors that affect ethical behavior and offers techniques for resisting unethical actions. Ultimately, the curriculum helps people build and practice the skills they need to recognize, speak, and act on their values effectively when conflicts arise.

The GVV approach includes:

- How a leader raises values-based issues in an effective manner – what she/he needs to do to be heard and how to correct an existing course of action when necessary.
- An emphasis on self-assessment and a focus on individual strengths when looking for a way to align one's individual sense of purpose with that of an organization.
- Opportunities to construct and practice responses to frequently heard reasons and rationalizations for not acting on one's values.
- Positive examples of times when people have found ways to voice and thereby implement their values in the workplace.
- Practice in providing peer feedback and coaching.

Discussion questions: GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations

1.   Brainstorm some common rationalizations (e.g., "everybody's doing it," "it's just standard operating procedure," "I don't want to hurt my friend, colleague, boss, firm, club, etc."), and discuss

ways to respond to them. (See "Keeping Your Colleagues Honest" by Mary C. Gentile in Harvard Business Review, March 2010 for more on this.)

2.   If you suspect that your ethical objections will not be heard, is it still worthwhile to make them? Why or why not?

3.   Is it necessary to have a foolproof argument when raising an ethical objection?

4.   Think about a time when you (or someone you observed) were able to effectively respond to those "reasons and rationalizations." What are some effective ways to re-frame the challenge and/or respond to them?

5.   When raising an ethical concern, how might you balance the need to prepare responses to common reasons and rationalizations with the need to remain open to legitimate arguments raised against your position?

Additional Resources

Giving Voice to Values case studies, curriculum, and additional teaching pedagogy are available at no cost to educators at the [Giving Voice to Values Curriculum](#) website.

Further details about the "Reasons & Rationalizations" pillar may be found in Chapter Eight of *Giving Voice to Values*, "Reasons and Rationalizations."

For a discussion of the "GVV Starting Assumptions," see Chapter One of *Giving Voice to Values*, "Giving Voice to Our Values: The Thought Experiment."

A summary of the seven pillars of GVV may be downloaded here: [An Action Framework for Giving Voice To Values—"The To-Do List."](#)

For further discussion of the GVV approach, see Mary Gentile's article published in *Organization Management Journal*, "[Values-Driven Leadership Development: Where We Have Been and Where We Could Go](#)."

Gentile, Mary C. (2010). [Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right](#). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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Transcript of Narration

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""Reasons and Rationalizations" refer to the objections we hear from our colleagues when we try to point out an ethical problem in the way things are being done. Or sometimes we don't hear the objections because they are the unspoken assumptions of the organization.

It can be difficult to make a strong argument against the assumed "prevailing winds" in an organization if we feel in the minority; or if we don't feel we have the time to come up with a workable alternative; or if we don't want to take the chance to present a half-baked response.

If, on the other hand, we anticipate the types of arguments we are likely to hear when we face values conflicts, we can work on pre-scripting persuasive and well-reasoned responses. Just think about the challenges you have faced thus far in your lives, or the kinds of issues you read about in the business press. Certain industries and professions and regions of the world trigger their own types of conflicts, and all of these are fairly predictable.

Likewise the arguments used to justify or explain questionable behaviors are similarly predictable, such as:

- "It's not my responsibility to deal with this."
- "This is just standard operating procedure in this industry or in this part of the world."
- "This may be wrong but it's not "material" – It's not a big enough deal to worry about."
- "I don't want to get someone in trouble by raising this issue."

These types of arguments are among the most common "reasons & rationalizations" we hear and they are all vulnerable to counter-argument. For example, if we hear "It's not my responsibility" to deal with this, the good news is that the speaker is already acknowledging, at least implicitly, that there is a problem. So often the best way to respond to him or her is not to argue that it's their responsibility, but rather to engage them in brainstorming ways that the situation might be addressed effectively. Once they have some workable ideas for an implementation plan, motivating action is likely to be easier.

Similarly, each of the other "reasons and rationalizations" we might face are surmountable. The responses that have worked for individuals who HAVE found ways to voice and enact their values weren't necessarily foolproof; they just had to be credible."

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This material is based upon the Giving Voice To Values curriculum (www.GivingVoiceToValues.org). The Aspen Institute was founding partner, along with the Yale School of Management, and incubator for Giving Voice To Values (GVV). Now based and supported at Babson College.