

Framing: Sports Edition

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*.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: framing, self-serving bias, moral myopia, and tangible & abstract.

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?

Transcript of Narration

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In any kind of decision-making, context counts. The simple reframing of a situation or a question can produce a totally different answer from the same person.

For example, when NASA was deciding whether or not to launch the space shuttle Challenger in 1986, Morton Thiokol's engineers opposed the launch on safety grounds. But when the general manager instructed the engineers to "take off their engineers' hats and put on their management hats," he changed their frame of reference. Instead of the launch being a decision focused on safety, it became one focused on dollars and cents. Unfortunately, the engineers then changed their minds. The Challenger was launched, and exploded.

In sports, it is natural to focus on winning. A UCLA football coach once said: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." But, just as a focus on profits can lead to poor moral choices in business, if we focus solely on winning in sports and omit ethics from our frame of reference, we can also mess up.

For example, Lance Armstrong, the now infamous cyclist, doped while winning seven Tour de France titles. Armstrong focused so completely on winning that he rationalized his doping as simply doing what it took to win, since he believed others were also doping. He ignored the fact that he was one of the major creators of the doping culture on the tour. Armstrong had dropped morality from his frame of reference, which is why he was later divested of all his titles and banned for life from competitive cycling.

Maintaining ethics in our frame of reference is challenging, especially when winning is the goal. When a Houston Astros' front office official objected because the team was considering signing a free agent pitcher who had been charged with domestic abuse, the team's general manager snapped: "I don't want your moral opinion. I want your baseball opinion."

Moral opinions are never irrelevant. As athletes, it's important to remember that if we "win" by cheating, we're not really winning. We did beat the system, but we did not gain the skill it takes to truly win. And we've lost the integrity that comes with winning fair and square. Athletes — like business people and all the rest of us — are advised to always keep ethics in their frame of reference in order to live up to their own moral standards.

Bibliography

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Additional Resources

The latest resource from Ethics Unwrapped is a book, [*Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions*](#), written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice. This accessible book is amply footnoted with behavioral ethics studies and associated research. It also includes suggestions at the end of each chapter for related Ethics Unwrapped videos and case studies. Some instructors use this resource to educate themselves, while others use it in lieu of (or in addition to) a textbook.

Cara Biasucci also recently wrote a chapter on integrating Ethics Unwrapped in higher education, which can be found in the latest edition of [*Teaching Ethics: Instructional Models, Methods and Modalities for University Studies*](#). The chapter includes examples of how Ethics Unwrapped is used at various universities.

The most recent article written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice describes the basics of behavioral ethics and introduces Ethics Unwrapped videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples. It also includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. Published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), it can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\)](#)."

An article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduce key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—

including sample classroom assignments. Published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, it can be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.](#)"

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

Another article by Robert Prentice, discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, was published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. It can 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.