

Incrementalism: Sports Edition

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as incrementalism. Referred to as the “slippery slope,” incrementalism describes how we unconsciously lower our ethical standards over time through small changes in behavior. Incrementalism may occur when the ethical dimensions of an issue fade from view. For leaders, incrementalism may have dire effects on the companies or people they oversee.



To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Ethical Fading* and *Ethical Leadership, Part 1: Perilous at the Top*.

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.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: ethical fading, framing, and incrementalism.

Discussion Questions

1. Psychologist Dan Ariely says, “The first dishonest act is the most important one to prevent.” Why does he say that? Do you agree?
2. Can you think of a situation where you were a victim of the slippery slope phenomenon?
3. Have you seen a friend or read about someone in the newspaper who started cutting little corners and was soon in big trouble?
4. Cynthia Cooper, whistleblower of the infamous WorldCom financial fraud, wrote: “People don’t wake up and say, ‘I think I’ll become a criminal today.’ Instead, it’s often a slippery slope and we lose our footing one step at a time.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. Clayton Christensen, a professor at the Harvard Business School, has stated that one of the most important lessons of his life is that it is easier to do the right thing a hundred percent of the time than ninety-eight percent of the time.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. What can people do to prevent a mistake from snowballing down the slippery slope?

Transcript of Narration

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People tend to believe that they have good moral character, and are therefore confident that they will make good choices when they face moral issues.

But Cynthia Cooper, who was the whistleblower in a gigantic financial fraud, wrote: “People don’t wake up one day and say, ‘Today is the day I think I’ll start my life of crime.’ Instead, it’s often a slippery slope; we slowly lose our ethical footing one step at a time.” This psychological influence is what behavioral ethicists call “incrementalism.”

Research shows that most multi-million-dollar financial frauds started with people fudging fairly small numbers. Over time, those numbers grew larger. As an executive in the Enron scandal said (quote): “You did it once, it smelled bad. You did it again, it didn’t smell bad.” This is how incrementalism works.

Incrementalism also happens in the world of sports. In 2006, U.S.C. running back Reggie Bush lost the National Championship game, but he won the Heisman Trophy that year. Later, the NCAA learned that Bush had been taking bribes from a sports agent while still in college. The bribery probably started small, maybe when he accepted a limo ride from the sports agent to the Heisman Trophy ceremony the year before. But things tend to escalate. When you’ve taken one thing, taking something a little more valuable the next time doesn’t seem so bad. Ultimately, Bush and his family accepted \$300,000 or more in cash and gifts. Bush had to forfeit the Heisman Trophy and U.S.C was severely punished by the NCAA.

Clayton Christensen became a famous professor at Harvard Business School. When he was in college, Christensen helped his British university’s basketball team reach the national championship contest. The game was scheduled for a Sunday, and Christensen refused to play. To play a game on Sunday would violate his Mormon faith. When the coach urged Christensen to make an exception just this one time, he refused. Christensen knew that if he did something he felt to be wrong one time, it would be easier to make an excuse the next time temptation appeared.

The way we can stop from sliding down the slippery slope is to do the right thing every time, as challenging as that may be. As Professor Christensen knew, given the influence of incrementalism, it’s easier to do the right thing one hundred percent of the time than it is to do it ninety-eight percent of the time.

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.