

AUGUST 2010

McKinsey Quarterly

Voicing values in the workplace

Professor Mary Gentile explores ethical dilemmas at work and how to act on them.



Recent years have seen an unprecedented breakdown in public trust of business, spurred in no small part by instances of unethical behavior at some of the world's most powerful institutions. Mary Gentile, director of business curriculum at Babson College, says the real challenge for business students, employees, and executives isn't knowing what's right, but knowing how to act on those convictions within an organization. In this video interview, Gentile shares insights and experiences on how to do that, which she's gathered through her work developing the *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum and her eponymous book.¹ McKinsey Publishing's Lily Cunningham conducted the interview with Mary Gentile in New York in June 2010.

Rethinking business-ethics training

About 10, 12 years ago, I had kind of what I call a “crisis of faith,” where I started to wonder if it was really ethical to teach business ethics. Because I would be in situations where I would be either teaching the material or developing curricula, working with faculty, and—but I kept getting feedback from students who said, “Well, but you really can't do this. You know, sure, this might be the right thing to do, but you're not going to be able to be effective in business. These are not [issues] that you can actually talk about and raise.”

And so I started to wonder if it was kind of an exercise in hypocrisy to be teaching these things when we all sort of knew and wink-wink, you know, this isn't really going to happen.

There are people who have made unethical decisions and done quite well, thank you very much. And there are organizations that have survived for long periods with certain kinds of misbehaviors.

But I had this experience where I was doing some consulting for Columbia Business School at the time and I had the opportunity—they were asking all their incoming MBAs to write a little essay about a time when they had experienced a values conflict and how they'd handled it.

And the largest group—a little less than half—did, in fact, say, “Yes, I encountered a values conflict. It was not what I wanted to do, but I really didn't think I had any options, so I just sucked it up and did what they asked me to do.” But there was a small group that said, “Yes, I had a values conflict. And I really couldn't imagine what I could do, but I also couldn't bring myself to do it. So I either quit or I got myself transferred to a different work group, or a different manager.”

But there were about a third of them who said, “Yes, I encountered this values conflict, and I tried to do something about it.” And some of them failed. But about a quarter of the whole group said, “Yes, I tried to do something. And, by my lights, I was successful.”

¹Mary C. Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

So I started looking for interviews, people who had, in fact, found ways to voice their values, to try and figure out what is it that made it possible for you to do this? And we started to feel that maybe that's what we should be focusing on in our teaching.

The many ways of speaking up

I sort of thought, jeez, you have to be brave. You have to be extroverted. You have to be aggressive and assertive to be able to stand up and do this.

And what I found instead is that some folks I would interview, and when I asked them why they were able to take this stand, would say, "Well, I've always been kind of a risk taker and I like stirring it up." But there were other people who said, "Well, I've actually—I've always seen myself as kind of a cautious and fearful person." And so that was where they drew the strength to do this from.

I realized that if you preach to a cautious person to be bold and morally courageous, you're not going to get that far. And if you preach to a kind of risk taker, an assertive kind of hard-charging businessperson, you have to be more cautious. You have to play it safe. You're not going to be that effective.

So what I ended up realizing is that the tool is that these people took control of their own experience and framed it in a way that made it comfortable for them and played to their strengths. People thought creatively about—just in the way they might want to sell some other idea within an organization—if they want to make some other kind of organizational shift. They thought about this as part of their work, as opposed to some sort of moral cause that I have to stand up on Tuesday and do, and then get back to work on Wednesday.

Overcoming organizational barriers

When I interviewed people who were very junior in the organization, they would tend to say things like, "Well, this would be great when I get to be in the C-suite or when I get to be at a policy-setting level. But I don't have the experience or the relationships or the legitimacy or the power right now."

And then I would interview people who were CEOs and COOs and CFOs, and they would say, "This is great if I were more junior in the organization, because there would be less at stake. But I have a lot of people depending on me now, and so it's very difficult to do this." Then I would interview people in the middle, and they would say, "Well, if I were more junior or if I were more senior, but I have pressures coming—I'm being squeezed from all levels."

So everyone had a reason why they were at the wrong place to make change. But, nevertheless, I also found individuals at each level who did, in fact, find ways to voice and act their values. But they did them in ways that were consistent with where they were. So

the more junior people tended to ask questions. They tended to, you know, say, “But what about this?” And the questions were not always, “Is this right?” or “Isn’t this wrong?” It was more that the question actually made the stakes or the risks more credible or more visible. So they would ask them in a truly learning way, because they were in a more junior place in the organization.

At the more senior level, people would often see it more as something where they needed to be inspiring, where they needed to lead. There was a CFO that I interviewed, a recently promoted CFO who, just as he was taking on the new position, was being asked by some of his senior colleagues to make some adjustments in their quarterly reporting that he felt were over the line.

So he was really torn, because he sort of felt, “Well, this is just as I’m assuming this new role. I want these people to be my allies and colleagues and help me get done the things I need to get done. On the other hand, I don’t think this is right.” So he went back and forth and he finally—the way he decided to frame it for himself was, “Actually, if I do it now, I have greater leverage than I would have if I waited. If I went along with it now in order to get them to be on my side, they’d think they knew who I was. It would be even harder.”

So he was taking a very different stance that one could take at a different level in the organization. The people whom I’ve interviewed at junior, at middle, in the middle of the organizations, they usually needed to do a combination of things. They needed to think about both asking people to change their behavior, but also saying, “But I understand the organizational incentives that are in place and the pressures that make it difficult. So I am also working on changing those organizational structures and incentive systems.” They were able to show good faith and they were able to have something to give—as they were asking for something.

So people took different strategies that were appropriate—I mean, just as I was saying earlier, you have to choose a strategy that fits with who you are personally. You also need to think about a strategy that fits with your particular levers and power level and relationships within the organization.

Promoting values within your organization

So it *can* be formal training. But I don’t think it always has to be a formal training program.

There are other things, of course, too, in terms of organizational structure—codes and things like that. But those are things we’ve known about for a long time and they’re clearly not enough. One of the things that seemed to be really important was to be able to share out loud your own thought process with your reports.

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It’s just like with management, right? You want to draw out the best in your employees so that when they’re in a difficult situation, they are going to be able to think creatively and handle that situation, even if you’re not there to direct them.

It’s the same kind of thing. And sure, some people can say, “No, what we need to do—that’s putting a lot of faith in your employees, that, when they’re on the front line, they’re going to be able to do that. Shouldn’t we have everything by the rule?” And obviously, you need to have a balance, but, in the end, I think that you’re always going to be in a situation where you can’t predict everything and you’re going to end up having rules that are either not adequate, that don’t anticipate, or that may even have contradictory impacts.

So I’m not saying it will always work. I’m not saying it’s always easy. But I’m saying I think we’re going to have more—we’ll be more effective at our efforts to develop this kind of an ethical muscle in our managers, if we’re more honest about the situations that they find themselves in, and we’re more honest about giving them the tools to navigate them, rather than just giving them a rulebook. ○