



Reinventing Ethics

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Life Goals

Do you remember your earliest life goal? Does your current profession have anything to do with it? Sometimes, these early objectives become a sort of implicit vocational blueprint, even when we are not consciously pursuing them.

I remember my very first career goal, conceived at the age of 7 or 8, was to write a book. However, unlike the books I've actually written as an adult—on such topics as business ethics education, managing diversity and even feminist film theory—this book was supposed to be a manual for everyone about “How To Be Happy,” and what's more, it was supposed to be less than 100 pages long. In retrospect, I think this vocational aspiration reflects the twin pillars of my identity—earnestness and pragmatism. That is, I wanted to be a positive force in the world—hence, helping people be happy—but I also was acutely aware of all the countervailing pressures against any such heartfelt objective, so keep it short!

Does Ethics Make Us Happy?

Jump forward, past my twenty-five years of work in business education with leading schools like Harvard Business School and Columbia Business School and INSEAD, and lo and behold, I think I just wrote that book! Now sure, the work appears to be about voicing and acting on your values in the workplace, but when you actually examine the approach, it is about finding ways to be true to yourself, and to find strength and skillfulness and efficacy, and dare I say it, *happiness* in being yourself in the professional world. And although more than 100 pages, it is brief!

The message here is brief because, at heart, it's not an argument so much as a “new” question. Instead of asking and answering questions like “what is ethical?” or “is it possible to be ethical at work?” what if we asked “ how can we successfully voice and act on our own values?”

That is, what if we started from the premise that most people already have values and would like to act on them, and instead of proselytizing or regulating, we empowered and inspired and practiced this kind of values-driven action?

What if thou *shalt not* became *can do*?

What if we developed *moral competence* rather than bemoaned a lack of *moral courage*?

What if we looked at ethics as a wellspring of passion and creativity rather than of required restraint?

What if our values became a source of satisfaction, rather than a threat of guilt?

What if we asked *what if*?

So armed with these powerful two words—WHAT IF?—let's set out to reinvent business ethics. Instead of the realm of the naive, the Polly-Anna's and the scolds, let's make it the arena for the entrepreneurial and the practical. What if we wanted to do this? What would it look like? What might be the guiding principles if we wanted to accomplish this transformation?

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Define What Matters to You

Well, first of all, let's focus on what we choose to value rather than what we are required to forego.

If we ask the fundamental question “Why do we work?” we can generate quite a few responses. We work to make money, to support ourselves and our families, to be able to obtain the things and pursue the experiences we want in our lives. And we also work to have a certain impact in the world, whether that means providing a service or product, or improving the lives of our customers or our clients or our patients or our communities. And some—the truly lucky among us—work because we enjoy the process, the “flow” of our activity.

What if we asked *what if?*

Ten years ago, I traveled to Kolkata to take a class on management and human values at the Indian Institute of Management. The course opened by suggesting that work was “sacrifice.” Now, as someone who had been motivated by the pursuit of happiness since at least the age of seven (as established a few paragraphs ago) this did not set well with me. But as I settled into the class, I began to see that “sacrifice” could suggest a deeper and bigger purpose for my work. That is, sacrifice did not have to be defined as pain or deprivation; it could be defined as outward-focused, purposeful activity—activity with a larger impact and greater meaning.

Now you might say, not every job is about something big and meaningful. But then I remembered the waitress in Studs Terkel's masterpiece of vocational anthropology, *Working*, who defined her job as “bringing food to people”—a worthy goal if I ever heard one and an objective that revealed the significance in a position that we might otherwise think of as tedious.

The more broadly we can define the positive values we want to serve or achieve in our work, the greater pool of energy, commitment and even arguments we can draw from when we strive to voice and act on our values in the workplace. And the deeper our work's purpose, the easier it is to put other, perhaps more immediate but less positively impactful, objectives in perspective. What if we defined our purpose as building a sales force that was driven by the desire to identify and solve customer problems more effectively, rather than by a bigger bonus this quarter? One of these objectives drives innovation in product development and service, while too often the other may merely drive creative accounting.

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Be Yourself

Did you ever notice something interesting about those local heroes who find themselves being interviewed on the nightly news programs? You know the ones: people who pulled a complete stranger from a burning home, or who climbed down into a ravine to rescue a child trapped there, or who crawled out onto the ice to rescue a dog stranded in the middle of a pond in winter. Often they will say something like “I just did what I had to do” or “I don’t feel like a hero. I just did what seemed obvious.”

This isn’t just modesty. There is a fundamental truth in these statements. These folks are “being themselves.” And I have found the same thing when interviewing individuals who have found ways to voice and enact their values in conflicted situations in their professional lives. They say things like “The reason I wanted to work here is because I believed it was a values-driven organization. I didn’t want to lose that.” or “I have always tried to be honest with my direct reports. They would see right through me if I lied.”

But that does not mean that only a select few born heroes can act this way. These same folks often had other stories of times when they failed to act on their values. No one is all good or all bad in this arena. Rather it means that we need to figure out how to frame the challenges we face in life so that we can play to our strengths; so that acting on our values can feel like “the obvious thing to do,” so we can be our best selves more effectively and more of the time.

The real estate developer who told me that he was a competitive kind of guy who truly enjoyed beating the odds in his professional life refused the unethical business proposition because he framed the choice as daring to build an ethical enterprise. Whereas the analyst at a much storied investment bank refused her friend’s pressures to share proprietary information because she saw herself as a “fearful” and cautious type and standing up to her friend seemed the safer route.

Now each of these choices could just as easily be framed in reverse. Taking the unethical real estate proposition could be the risky path, and caving in to a friend's pressures could be seen as the option requiring less courage. The point is that we can consciously choose to build a frame or story around our decisions that enables us to play to our strengths. If I see myself as cautious, don't preach to me about moral courage; give me a story that helps to frame the values-driven choice as safer. And if I see myself as an aggressive businessperson, help me to envision ethical choices as the nerver and potentially higher-return option.

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Recognize You Are Not Alone

One of the most common refrains in any discussion of ethics or values—whether it’s in the MBA classroom in the world’s leading business schools or in the office conference room—is that we cannot assume that our values are the same as anyone else’s, especially when you are working in a global context. Doesn’t ethics just turn out to be a kind of self-serving self-righteousness?

Although the risk of arrogance is real, too often this argument can devolve into a rationalization for less than ethical choices clothed in kind of sanctimonious cross-cultural understanding. And when this argument is coupled with the fear that we are the only ones who are worried about a values conflict in the workplace, self-doubt and felt isolation and “groupthink” can silence our better instincts.

But interestingly, although differences in cultural experience, history, norms and laws are unquestionably real, research suggests that, at heart, there are a set of deep human values that are widely shared across group, across geography and across time. These “hyper-norms” provide us with the assurance that there is indeed a possibility for a common understanding despite differences. On the other hand, the fact that these values comprise a very short list—things like honesty, fairness, compassion—suggests that we think carefully both about the significance of the issues we are raising and also about the ways we frame them and the values to which we appeal once the issues pass the threshold of importance. That is, one Buddhist’s “bodhicitta” may appeal to another Christian’s “charity.”

Recognizing in this way that our deepest values are often shared can be the source of comfort as well as encouragement when it comes to acting on them, and it can also provide guidance on how to raise and frame them effectively. That is, begin with the assumption that your audience has values, rather than that they are devoid of them. And assume that, although you may differ on many things, you are likely to share some deep commitments. And then look for ways to frame your arguments so as to highlight those commonalities. Finally, recognize that even if you never convince your assumed target audience, there are quite likely others around you who will share your perspectives and who may now be more likely to reveal themselves to you. Hence, you will have company in your company.

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Practice

The re-invention of business ethics requires practice. We know from academic research as well as common sense that repetition builds not only the skill but also the likelihood that we will act and speak in a particular manner. Cognitive neuroscience tells us that such repetition builds neural pathways; Olympic athletes tell us that repetition builds muscle memory; psychology and sociology tells us that pre-scripting builds efficacy; our parents told us that “practice makes perfect.”

With this multi-sourced lesson in mind, it seems counter-intuitive that much of the time spent discussing values and ethics in business focuses on why we can't or don't act ethically, rather than on inviting us to develop, pre-script and practice delivering the arguments and reasons why we could and do so.

Which brings us right back to the question we began with: “What if?” That is, instead of arguing that individuals cannot buck their superiors in the organization when told to “cook the books”(think WorldCom) or to cut corners on safety regulations (think, tragically, BP.), what if we simply asked “but what if they wanted to resist? What could they say?” And then what would they hear back, in the form of push back and rationalizations, and how could they then respond to that?

There are often no easy answers to these questions, but then again, there are no easy answers to why integrity or safety wouldn't matter either. It's just that we seem to feel more comfortable voicing the cynical position than the values-driven one. This unfortunate comfort with cynicism is often based in a fear of antagonizing those who have power over us in the organization or of appearing to be less than committed to the organization's success or even of simply seeming less savvy and experienced.

But these fears are all vulnerable to re-framing. A fear of antagonizing our boss can be reframed as our concern for his or her well-being and success. A fear of appearing less than committed to the organization's success can be reframed as a commitment to the longer term survival of the firm. A fear of appearing inexperienced can be reframed as an awareness of the price paid by others who took this unfortunate path in the past.

The re-invention of business ethics requires practice.


None of these arguments are perfect, but neither are the arguments for the less than ethical decision. The point is that anticipation, careful pre-scripting and practice makes us more comfortable with whichever position we take—and we have a choice about where to invest that effort. And the more we practice that choice, the more likely we are to make it. It becomes our default.

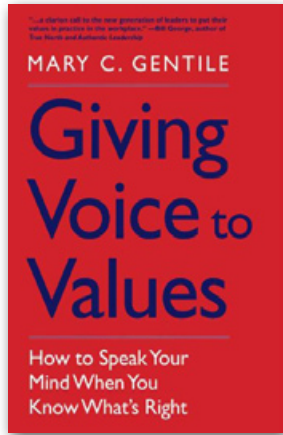
Have We Re-Invented Business Ethics Yet?

If we take a look at our four maxims here—Define what matters to you, Be yourself, Recognize you are not alone, and Practice—it becomes clear that the first three are all about thinking about and doing things that come naturally. And the fourth one—practice—is about making all of the above more comfortable.

In other words, these lessons invite us to be more of who we want to be, rather than to focus on doing less of what we want to do—as ethics is often framed. And they invite us to become more creative at crafting arguments for our values-based positions, rather than on rejecting the clever and creative justifications for transgression—as traditional approaches to ethics often do. And they invite us to feel part of a historically and globally powerful majority, rather than part of an isolated and often seemingly unpopular minority—as business ethics classes sometimes appear to do.

Finally, aren't figuring out what matters to us and finding ways to be true to ourselves and to feel connected all pathways to happiness? So, in the end, isn't "giving voice to values" a manual for how to be happy (and in less than 100 pages)?

So perhaps, the last but most important suggestion is to think about who you wanted to be and what you wanted to do when you were seven or eight. **What can you learn from that, in the service of your own happiness and the realization of your own true and deepest values?** 



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Get more details or buy a copy of Mary C. Gentile's [Giving Voice to Values](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary C. Gentile, Ph.D. is Director of the innovative curriculum, [Giving Voice to Values](#), launched by Aspen Institute and Yale SOM, now supported by Babson College. This pioneering approach to values-driven leadership has been featured in the *Financial Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *strategy+business*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, and is being piloted in well over 100 business schools and organizations globally. Gentile's other publications include: *Can Ethics Be Taught? Perspectives, Challenges, and Approaches at Harvard Business School* (with Thomas Piper & Sharon Parks); *Managerial Excellence Through Diversity: Text and Cases*.

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