Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Turning Values into Action

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2010

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
Email: info@ssireview.org, **www.ssireview.org**

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SOCIAL INNOVATORS ARE USUALLY MOTIVATED BY THEIR PERSONAL VALUES, YET THEY DON'T ALWAYS ACT ON THEM, BECAUSE THEY ARE AFRAID IT MIGHT LEAD TO CONFLICT. EVEN WHEN THEY DO ACT, IT OFTEN ENDS BADLY. TO REMEDY THIS, SOCIAL INNOVATORS CAN LEARN HOW TO ARTICULATE THEIR VALUES CONSISTENTLY AND ACT ON THEM IN A WAY THAT IS LIKELY TO LEAD TO GOOD OUTCOMES.

BY MARY C. GENTILE

Illustration by Gwénola Carrère

I WAS RECENTLY INVITED to speak to a gathering of young social innovators about ethics and values and the conflicts that can emerge over them. The group included a manager of a Fortune 200 company who was helping his firm develop green packaging design, a business entrepreneur who was designing a way for people in developing countries to use mobile phones to access goods and services more easily, and a social entrepreneur who was attempting to transform the environmental footprint of a significant portion of the food industry.

I was invited to speak because for the last few decades I have examined the way business schools around the world teach ethics and values, and I have developed a new approach for preparing future leaders to act on their values. Instead of asking, "What is the right thing to do?" this approach starts at the point when you have already decided what is "right," and instead asks, "How can I get it done?" This approach is all about building the skills and the

muscle to get the right thing done. It is not about perseverating about what philosopher John Rawls might say as opposed to Aristotle, or discussing our immobilizing fears at how our bosses or colleagues might react. I help people practice their arguments about values, out loud and in front of their peers, so that these scripts become the person's default position when she confronts a situation where her values are on the line.

I had, perhaps naively, assumed that social innovators would quickly resonate with this emphasis on action and that we could move directly to a creative brainstorming session about what would be the most persuasive ideas and arguments we could craft to promote the values-based positions that they each espoused about the environment, public health, socially responsible investing, and other important issues. After all, they were here precisely because they were trying to enact their values through their work.

Many of the social innovators did warm to my approach and turned directly to action planning. But a couple of people spoke up with objections. One said: "But Mary, my project is all about positive values, social impact, and innovation. And my employer is supporting me. So why are you talking to me about ethical conflict?" I responded that social enterprises and nonprofits are not immune to ethical challenges—in fact, whenever two or more people get together there are likely to be values conflicts.

During the session, one successful and internationally known social innovator working at a major corporation became strangely quiet. Later that evening he pulled me aside to say that I had "rocked his world," shaking his previous confidence that he was already doing everything he could to voice his values, simply by the nature of his work.

This line of thinking—that because my cause is pure, I don't need to be concerned about values, conflicts, or ethics—is particularly relevant for social innovators. It can blind social innovators to their own value biases or failings; and worse, it can too easily let them conclude that their pure ends can justify some questionable means.

Despite very real and thorny ethical complexities and pressures, some people find successful ways to voice and act on their values, and we can learn from them. This is a skill that can be developed, principally by anticipating the types of values conflicts that might arise and practicing our responses to them. This article explains how to do that, an approach called Giving Voice to Values (GVV),[1] and the seven principles that make up the approach.

FINDING MY VOICE

Giving Voice to Values grew out of a personal crisis of faith. After spending many years helping business school faculty integrate ethics into MBA programs, I began to wonder if teaching business ethics was truly ethical. Most business ethics programs focused first on building awareness of the problem—on the assumption that managers needed to learn to recognize ethical conflicts when they encountered them—and next on teaching models of ethical reasoning and analysis—so that managers could discipline their thinking to determine what was right or wrong.

The problem with this approach to teaching ethics is that it doesn't address the actual problem that most managers confront in real life—the troubling situation when a manager already knows what she believes is right but she doesn't believe it is possible to act on her belief. I asked myself, "Is it even possible for business managers to put these lessons into practice?" And if it isn't possible, "Was I simply providing cover for business schools that wanted to say that they taught ethics?"

As I was trying to answer these questions I had the good fortune to find two pieces of data. First, I worked with the Aspen Institute's Business and Society Program on their surveys of MBA students, which found that most students expected to encounter values conflicts in their careers and when they did, that they would be genuinely troubled by them. In the most recent survey, more than 80 percent of the respondents reported that they strongly (28.6 percent) or somewhat (54.2 percent) agreed that they were likely to encounter values conflicts in business. In the same survey, 7 percent of students reported that they were not being prepared at all to manage values conflicts, and 50 percent reported that they were only somewhat prepared. Interestingly, the closer students are to graduation, the more they report a lack of preparation.[2]

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I encountered the second data point while consulting at Columbia Business School. There, I had the good fortune to read more than 1,000 essays written by students about a time in their career when their own values conflicted with what they were asked to do in the workplace, and how they handled the situation. What was striking about the essays was that with very few exceptions, all of the students had similar stories to tell—pressures to distort earnings reports; pressures to inflate product capabilities; pressures to lie to colleagues or customers; and so on. What differed was how the students handled these pressures. The largest group, just under 50 percent, simply sucked it up and did what they were told. The next largest group tried to do something, with a 3-1 ratio of students who felt they were successful versus those who felt they failed. A much smaller group, about 5 percent of the total, was so troubled by the situation they encountered that they requested a transfer to another team or quit their job.

I wondered why some students were able to act on their values while others were not able to do so. After rereading these essays I saw that the answer was not that some students had a deeper moral awareness; the ones who acted successfully did not express more moral discomfort than their peers did. And it was not because some students were able to better analyze the situation; the students who

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acted did not seem to have a more sophisticated understanding of the situation than those who didn't act. The only difference that I could find was that at some point during the experience the successful actors had said something to someone about the situation. They often began by speaking to a friend, a family member, or a spouse, but what eventually changed the trajectory of the experience was that they were able to say something to someone inside of their organization about their dilemma—in effect *giving voice to their values*.

Those two pieces of data led me to look deeper into the subject. In doing so, I found an interesting piece of research on altruism and moral courage that had been published several decades ago by Douglas Huneke and Perry London. In the research the two interviewed "rescuers"—people who had risked their lives to save others threatened by the Nazis in Europe.[3] One of the common traits that rescuers reported was that at an earlier time in their lives they had had the occasion to rehearse, out loud and in front of someone they respected, what they would say and how they would behave if they encountered a moral conflict. That is, they had pre-scripted themselves. Could business education provide such an opportunity for pre-scripting and rehearsal? Could business education make visible the reality that voicing and enacting values was possible and that many students had, in fact, already done so? These questions and subsequent interviews with managers who had voiced their values as well as current research in social psychology, behavioral economics, and cognitive neuroscience formed the basis for GVV.

GIVING VOICE TO VALUES

The goal of GVV is to transform the way we think about and respond to values conflicts when we encounter them. It starts from the assumption that most of us would like to act on our values if we thought we had a chance of being effective, and the principle that we can become better at acting on our values if we give *voice* to them beforehand by researching the situations, crafting action plans, pre-scripting our responses, and practicing our scripts.

Voice, in this context, is a metaphor for a wide variety of actions. It includes speaking, of course, but it also includes the entire process of action planning: data gathering; identifying what's at stake for all parties; anticipating arguments and crafting responses; building coalitions when necessary; and crafting systemic responses to systemic problems. Even if you follow the principles and process outlined in this approach, it is not easy to do, and there is no guarantee of success. Nevertheless, GVV is based on the premise that it is important to try and that voicing and enacting our values is a skill that can be developed and improved with practice.

GVV has been piloted in more than 100 schools and organizations on five continents. Although originally designed for MBA programs, increasingly it is being used in a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and executive education programs. Recently, business and nonprofit organizations have begun to experiment with ways to use the approach in their internal education programs.

Although it is too early to report the results of follow-up studies on the efficacy of GVV, there are a number of studies in development—including empirical studies in social psychology, pre- and post-learning assessments, and assessments of its impact when used to train accountants. There are, of course, many anecdotal reports of those who have been inspired to voice their values after experiencing the curriculum.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

GVV is based on seven principles: values, choice, normality, purpose, self-knowledge and alignment, voice, and reasons and rationalizations.

1. Values

Despite cultural differences, there is a set of *values* that everyone around the world shares and that we can appeal to when interacting with others. The list, however, is a short one: honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion.[4] Although one might quibble about the exact list of shared values, knowing that there is one provides a useful and manageable foundation for addressing values conflicts in the workplace.

Last year I was invited to Shanghai to speak to a group of nearly 100 business school professors from across China. The Chinese government had decided that business ethics should be a part of the required MBA curriculum, and this conference was designed to help faculty learn how to teach ethics. I had been warned that my approach might not appeal to people from other parts of the world, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, so I approached this event with the mind and heart of a learner.

I was pleased to find wide agreement with the idea that all people share certain core human values and that the kinds of organizational pressures and challenges that an individual confronts when trying to enact his values are similar. After several hours of engaged and positive discussion, however, one of the professors stood up and said: "I very much appreciate this GVV approach and would like to use it in my own teaching. My question is how do you voice your values when it is the government that you wish to contradict?"

In this moment, the common and deeply felt impulse to express one's values was palpable. There were certainly cultural differences that existed between us, but rather than getting stuck on those differences, we came together around our shared commitment to personal integrity and the desire to apply the GVV method to this particular cultural reality. To be sure, there are values that are not universally shared and that do give rise to conflict. Some might consider the process that I propose a sleight of hand, allowing people with different values to sidestep value conflicts. But in my experience this process creates a common space and the permission to try to solve a problem, without having to agree on everything before the process even begins.

2. Choice

Many of us have the feeling when encountering values conflicts that our hands are tied and that we can't do anything about it. But GVV encourages us to look back at our own history and posits that we all can think of times when we voiced or acted on our values in the face of a challenge, as well as times when we failed to do so. Acknowledging and examining these past *choices* can expand our ability and likelihood of choosing to enact our values in the future.

A major financial services firm had a corporate initiative to

increase the diversity of its professional staff. A partner at the firm argued, with some resentment, that he had been punished in the past when he made an effort to hire a diverse staff and ended up having to fire one of the people he had hired. "The firm is being hypocritical because I pay a price if I take a chance that fails," he said. Notwithstanding all the assumptions in his argument about how hiring anyone other than a white male would require him to "take a chance," the heart of his position was the idea that he did not have a choice. But when asked what price he had paid after his previous hire had not worked out, he sat in silence for a moment before acknowledging that he had not, in fact, actually paid any price at all, even though he had truly believed that he had.

This executive had more choices than he was able or willing to acknowledge, even to himself, until he was invited to do so, sincerely and without any malice. These moments of recognition—that we have made choices in the past and that we can do so in the future—can be empowering, but they need to be offered as invitations rather than as accusations.

3. Normality

Values conflicts are a regular and predictable part of our professional lives. By recognizing the *normality* of our ethical challenges, we reduce the tendency to vilify those with whom we disagree—a position that often limits our effectiveness in working with them. Normalizing also reduces the tendency to panic, freeze, or rush through these situations without using the full range of our skills and arguments.

A consultant for mergers and acquisitions was sitting in an airport with two executives from a firm that was to be acquired. They asked him: "Be straight with us. You've known us and worked with us for six months now and we're friends. Are our jobs on the cutting block?" Taken off guard and feeling torn between his friendship for the two men and his responsibility to his employer, he told the executives that he did not know, even though they all knew this was untrue. By saying this, he not only risked the trust he had built up with these individuals, he also probably telegraphed that they were, in fact, at risk. In my interview with this consultant, he said: "Mary, I lied. Instinctively I lied!" Lying bothered him, and he began to realize that if he stayed in this line of work he was going to encounter this situation again and again. He needed to think through what he could honestly say that would be helpful and preserve his working relationships, without violating his obligations to his employer.

So he pre-scripted himself. His message was something like this: "I'm sorry. Even though we've worked together and I like and respect you, we both know I'm legally and ethically bound not to divulge information about whose jobs might be lost. On the other hand, I want to be helpful to you. After seeing acquisitions and mergers many times before, my experience is that the people who fared best were the ones who took the following steps to optimize their options." He would then outline a set of career-enhancing moves that the person could make.

The important moment for the consultant came when he recognized that this is not an unusual situation and that it was going to come up again and again. The decision he faced was whether he was going to keep lying to the individual executives or to his employer, or whether he could come up with an honest answer that was still helpful. By normalizing this very predictable situation and pre-scripting himself, he was able to navigate the ethical waters with both compassion and integrity.

4. Purpose

It is easier to voice and enact your values when you have defined your personal, professional, and societal *purpose* both broadly and explicitly. People who find ways to be true to their values are those who put their daily decisions into a larger framework, asking whether the act is in line with their organization's mission and the reasons why they had selected their particular line of work. This kind of thinking helps people find the courage to act on their values and to find persuasive arguments to engage others.

A newly promoted chief financial officer (CFO) was strongly encouraged by his peers at the company to make some adjustments in the way certain financial restructurings were presented in the firm's quarterly report. The CFO felt that the adjustments amounted to falsifying the record, but wondered if he should buck his peers on his very first decision. When he stepped back and thought about what kind of organization he wanted to be leading and what his professional commitment was as a CFO, he decided not only to say no to his peers but also to seize the moment of his promotion to announce a new framework for financial reporting that was based on integrity, and to roll out a campaign and training program to promote it. He acted first and then asked for support from his CEO later. This approach worked, and his first major decision set the stage for a successful tenure as CFO.

What he did, in effect, was to write a new script for the organization, moving beyond the narrow request of his peers to a broader and more explicit statement of values that would not only empower his team to support his decision but also make it more difficult for the executives who were pressing him to carry out their agenda under the radar.

5. Self-Knowledge and Alignment

We won't make much headway asking someone to be bold and stand up for his principles if that person sees himself as cautious, or asking someone to be conservative if that person views herself as a firebrand. The trick is to build a story about who we are and how we voice our values that is based on *self-knowledge* and is in *alignment* with how we already see ourselves and that plays to our strengths.

Consider the earlier story about the angry partner in the financial services firm who was upset about hiring policies. It was actually a diversity consultant who saw herself as conflict averse who was able to move the partner to rethink his resentful stance. When the partner angrily asserted that the firm was being hypocritical and bemoaned the price he had paid for his previous commitment to diversity, she was stymied at first about how to proceed. She knew that this was a moment when she had the chance to live her values or back down.

There were all sorts of arguments that she might have raised to poke holes in his assertion: Wasn't it possible that his previous hire had "failed" because he did not receive the support that other hires received? When a white male had failed at a job, had the partner pledged to never again hire a white male? She didn't want to pursue this approach because she was not comfortable pitting herself

against this man. His style was forceful and combative and she was a bit of an introvert. Instead, she simply asked him—in all sincerity because she really wanted to understand—"So what price did you pay?" That question made all the difference when the partner recognized he had not really been penalized at all. The consultant, playing to her strengths and expressing her values in a manner that was consistent with her personality, broke through to a more genuine conversation with him about diversity.

6. Voice

The more we practice crafting and speaking our values and developing our own *voice*, the more likely those scripts will become our default positions when we face conflicts. We are more likely to say those words when we have pre-scripted ourselves and have rehearsed in front of our peers, inviting supportive feedback and constructive coaching.

This idea really hit home several years ago when I was teaching a course at Harvard Business School on managing diversity. I taught the course because I believed it was an important topic and skill for future managers, but also because I hoped that through researching the course and generating case studies, I would learn how to better stand up for diversity when I witnessed discriminatory behavior. Although the course went well and resulted in several books, in the end I still felt unconvinced that I would be better able to address inequity when I observed it.

Months after the course ended, I began working with a large consulting firm and found myself in a meeting between my team and a major client. The client began to make ethnic jokes that made me—and some of the junior consultants in the room who were a diverse group—uncomfortable. My senior partner said nothing, and I did not want to offend the client. With a smile and lighthearted tone I said: "Perhaps we should get down to business. We may have strayed into areas where we don't have enough information to support us." The client, not feeling singled out, chuckled with recognition and agreement. It may not have been the perfect response but there was a palpable relief among my team.

What I later realized was that I had spent so much time working through the arguments and counter-positions around diversity while designing my course that I had in effect prepared myself for such situations. I had normalized these situations. And I had practiced my voice, making that my default position. Because these words came naturally and easily, I did not need to screw up my courage or my emotion, and therefore I did not telegraph either blame or anxiety to my audience. It all seemed natural.

7. Reasons and Rationalizations

Not only are workplace values conflicts predictable, the arguments we are likely to hear when we try to speak up are predictable as well, which makes it easier to develop and practice effective responses. Some of the most common of these *reasons and rationalizations* are what I call preemptive rationalizations. They are the reasons we come up with before we even try to craft our action plan and that prevent us from applying our full creativity to the task.

Anyone who has spent much time in an organization has encountered some of these rationalizations. For example: "Everyone does this. It's the norm in this industry." A useful counter to this rationalization is to point out that "If it is standard practice, why is there a policy against it?" Another rationalization is, "If I stand up for my values here, I will hurt my manager." The interesting thing about appeals to loyalty is that they can go in any direction. One could answer, "Why should we choose to be loyal to our manager over our colleagues?" By unmasking the rationalization, it allows us to recognize that loyalty to one does not justify hurting another, and enables us to move forward and focus on problem solving.

"This decision won't really hurt anybody" is another often used rationalization. A useful response could point out that materiality depends on where one stands; what seems small to me might seem large to you. This kind of counterargument works best if it is couched as a story that illustrates the point, rather than offered as a righteous little speech. Or we might hear "This is not my responsibility." When someone uses this line of reasoning, she is already conceding that there may be an ethical problem. What we need to do then is move directly to solving the problem by providing real solutions, rather than spending time trying to persuade the person that she does have responsibility.

USING VALUES TO ACHIEVE GOALS

People working at all types of organizations are likely to run into ethical conflicts. Think about the challenges of appropriately allocating donations to the projects they were intended to support when the organization is drowning in operating expenses. Or consider the nuances of framing advocacy arguments in a way that accurately conveys what we know when it would be easy to inflame public emotions and raise support for our cause with slight modifications. The tools and frameworks in this article can help everyone craft values-driven arguments to deal with these types of pressures.

But the more distinctive application of GVV for social innovators is to think of it not only as a method for resisting the pressure to behave unethically, but also as a set of tools that can be used in the service of a positive social goal for which you want to enlist others' support. By focusing on creatively pre-scripting and practicing our positions, and using the many framing tools that are enumerated in the GVV approach,[5] we not only increase our effectiveness when we espouse them, but also increase the likelihood that we will do so in the first place. By making values a habit, we engage our colleagues and our constituencies in doing the same. ■

Notes

1 *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) was launched with the Aspen Institute and the Yale School of Management as founding partners. It is now housed at and funded by Babson College.

2 See the full reports of these studies, "Where Will They Lead?" at http://www.aspen-institute.org/publications/where-will-they-lead-2008-executive-summary-pdf.

3 Perry London, "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses About Christians Who Saved Jews from the Nazis," in *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social Psychological Studies of Some Antecedents and Consequences* (New York: Academic Press, 1970); and Douglas H. Huneke, *The Moses of Rovno: The Stirring Story of Fritz Graebe, a German Christian Who Risked His Life to Lead Hundreds of Jews to Safety During the Holocaust* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1985).

4 Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values Are Put to the Test* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005): 47.

5 See especially "Ways of Thinking About Our Values in the Workplace" and "Scripts and Skills" at www.GivingVoiceToValues.org.