

Activity: Giving Voice to Values

Giving Voice to Values (GVV) is an approach to business ethics that focuses on engaging in ethical decision discussions on-the-job. GVV is not a new or alternative method for discerning the moral issues in a decision or circumstance. Instead, it follows the ethical decision-making process to help business people actively engage in the decision-making discussion and help businesses take values-based action. [GVV was developed by Mary Gentile](#) for use in the graduate business classroom but can also be applied in the undergraduate classroom. Get more [information about GVV here](#).

Why do this activity?

Business policy and strategy are leadership responsibilities laden with decision-making. Strategy decisions reflect leader and organizational values and often have moral components, particularly regarding sustainability. Following the discussion norms co-creation activity, this exercise helps prepare students to create organizational climates that support organizations' robust ethical discussions.

What this activity is

This GVV exercise is a leadership development activity to understand the circumstances that provide organization members with the opportunity and support to speak their values.

When to do this activity

This activity should follow the [Co-creating Class Discussion Norms activity](#) and be associated with the ethics module in the business policy text and syllabus.

Learning Objectives

Identify the conditions that empower business people to voice their values effectively and which conditions tend to inhibit that action.

How to do it

This activity can be completed in one class meeting; it takes about one hour.¹

Tools, equipment, supplies

- Whiteboard marker

¹ Based on Mary Gentile (2016). *Giving Voice to Values Exercise: A Tale of Two Stories*. Darden Business Publishing. UVA-OB-1109TN.

- Hard copies of the “A Tale of Two Stories” handout (1 copy per student; see pages 4-6 below)

Instructions

1. Provide an introduction to the activity using the whiteboard or pre-prepared slides. Make connections between values, ethics, sustainability, strategy, and strategic decision-making based on prior classroom discussions. (5-10 minutes)

Introduction Outline:

- a. Review why it is important to create an organizational culture that encourages dialogue around ethical, moral, or value-laden issues and decisions:

Responsible companies find ways to engage in healthy discussion and debate about ethical and values-based decisions.

- *When society is undecided on the relevant norm.*
- *When company norms differ from societal norms.*
- *When there are a variety of perspectives inside the company.*
- *As a part of everyday conversation.*

- b. Review the definition of business ethics:

“Business ethics is making decisions that are ‘consistent with the principles, norms, and standards of business practices that have been agreed upon by society.’”²

Note that society sometimes has not yet developed widely shared norms or gets it wrong (i.e., slavery).

- c. Review the definition of values:

Strongly held beliefs that particular actions, behaviors, or outcomes are preferable to their alternatives.³

- d. Discuss the link between values and ethical decision-making, then tie this back (again) to leadership and strategy.

² Linda K. Trevino & Katherine A. Nelson (2011). *Managing business ethics: Straight talk about how to do it right* (5th ed.). Wiley.

³ Milton Rokeach (1973). *The nature of human values*. The Free Press.

2. Explain to students that this activity is a leadership development activity to understand the circumstances that provide organization members with the opportunity and support to speak their values, or how we “give voice to values.”
3. Distribute the “A Tale of Two Stories” handout and review activity instructions with students (see handout for details). (5 minutes)
 - Note that students will begin with an individual reflection on two personal stories. Combined, this will take about 10 minutes. Students are to make notes in the spaces provided on the handout (use the back of the page if additional space is needed). These notes are for the students; they will not turn them in.
4. Ask students to do their personal reflections and note-taking on stories 1 and 2 (10 minutes).
 - Circulate through the room during this reflection period to answer any questions students may have about the activity.
5. Stop student reflection on stories 1 and 2, and review the table group discussion instructions with students (see handout for details). (5 minutes)
 - Highlight the timekeeper, note-taker, and reporter roles.
 - Read discussion questions with the large group before setting table groups to their work.
6. Ask students to form groups of 3-4 people and conduct their “table group” conversation. (10-15 minutes)
 - Circulate through the room during this discussion to answer any questions students may have about the activity, particularly in regards to “enablers,” “disablers,” and “transformers.”
7. Once table groups have completed their work, ask each group to report on their “enablers,” “disablers,” and “transformers.” (10-15 minutes)
 - Make notes on the whiteboard as table groups report.
 - Ask clarifying questions as needed.
 - Connect common ideas and themes across group responses.
 - Close discussion by noting common enablers, disablers, and transformers.
8. Ask the large group for observations about how they can put these enablers to use as business leaders.

A Tale of Two Stories⁴

Learning objective: discover the conditions that empower you to voice your values effectively and which tend to inhibit that action.

Instructions

Begin with an individual reflection on two personal stories. Combined, this will take about 10 minutes. Make notes in the spaces provided (use the back of the page if additional space is needed). These notes are for you; you will not turn them in.

Story 1

Recall a time in your work experience when your values conflicted with what you were expected to do in a particular situation, and you spoke up and acted to resolve the conflict.

Consider the following four questions as you write some brief notes:

- What did you do and what was the impact?
- What motivated you to speak up and act?
- How satisfied are you? How would you have liked to respond? (This question is not about rejecting or defending past actions but about imagining your ideal scenario.)
- What would have made it easier for you to speak or act?
- Things within your control.
- Things within the control of others.

⁴ Based on Mary Gentile (2016). *Giving Voice to Values Exercise: A Tale of Two Stories*. Darden Business Publishing. UVA-OB-1109TN.

Story 2

Recall a time in your work experience when your values conflicted with what you were expected to do in a particular situation and you did not speak up or act to resolve the conflict.

Consider the following four questions and write down your thoughts and brief responses:

- What happened?
- Why didn't you speak up or act? What would have motivated you to do so?
- How satisfied are you? How would you have liked to respond? (This question is not about rejecting or defending past actions but about imagining your ideal scenario).
- What would have made it easier for you to speak or act?
- Things within your control.
- Things within the control of others?



Table Group Discussion

At your table, select a timekeeper, note-taker, and reporter.

Reporters should be prepared to summarize the themes about what factors enabled colleagues to voice/act on their values (“enablers”), what prevented them from doing so (“disablers”), and what ideas the group generated for responding to and transforming the “disablers.”

1. Each person shares their first story of when they acted on their values (about 3 minutes each).
2. As a group, identify commonalities or themes in your group’s responses to the story 1 questions. What are the similarities in how you acted or spoke? What was in your control and not?
3. Now consider your second story (no need to tell it) by focusing on your notes and why the outcome differed. How did the circumstances differ from those your group identified in the first stories? Share the difference with your group (again, no need to share the story 2).
4. Discuss: knowing what enabled the group to give voice to their values in the first stories, what might you do to change the outcome in the second story if faced with that situation again?

