

Giving Voice To Values: Lessons from India, Lessons from Life

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Abstract

In this brief article, author explains some of the experience of India and life that played an important role in framing and implementation of 'Giving Voice To Values' which is today a globally recognized curriculum for values-driven leadership development.

I have always been a somewhat “earnest” person. As a child, my parents used to caution my sisters to be patient with me because “Mary is different.” By this they meant that I thought differently, I took things more seriously than others sometimes. For example, when I was about twelve, I remember lying in the stillness of the bedroom one night, wrestling with my reflections on the day. Finally, I decided to risk my sister’s annoyance by asking her the question that troubled me: “Nancy,” I said, “when did you realize that our parents don’t know *everything*? That they aren’t always right?” My sister groaned and sighed, and gruffly replied: “Mary, you think too much.” And I supposed this is what my Mother meant when she said I was “different.”

I guess that everyone feels, in their heart of hearts, that they are different from everyone else. And I pray it is true, for what kind of world would it be if we were all the same? Still we all long to fit in, to find comfort and companionship in our similarities, too. And that comfort and companionship is what I experienced when I first ventured to India, over a decade ago.

I spent a week in a program at the Centre for Human Values at the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta; the program was called “Management By Human Values: Indian Perspectives.” The course was attended by approximately sixty managers from Indian businesses and civil society, and it covered topics relevant to their careers such as leadership, team management, dealing with stress, and so on. Each topic was introduced in relation to a set of lessons from Indian metaphysical and literary traditions. Stories from the Mahabharata and readings from Swami Vivekananda were interspersed with business case studies. We began each day with meditation and silence until after lunch. The morning’s quiet reflection, listening and reading were paired with eager debate and discussion every afternoon and evening, well into the late hours. And although I am typically an introverted

person who is not that comfortable in groups of new people, I found myself utterly engaged and at home.

I think this feeling of comfort was due to the commitment to self-reflection; to self-questioning; to personal growth; and to finding ways to lead more fulfilling and purpose-driven lives that I saw reflected, not only in the readings and teaching of the course but in my fellow participants. Although we were all adults, there was a generosity and openness of spirit, a willingness to question and share and grow that too often seems recedes as people grow older. And I felt entirely welcomed, perhaps because I shared this same desire to grow. In fact, one afternoon as I walked through an IIM classroom building, I came across a cluster of participants from my course, deeply engaged in conversation in Hindi. As I approached, they all fell silent. I feared that perhaps they may have been talking about me. As it turns out, I was right, but not in the negative tone I feared. One of these gentlemen stepped forward and said: “We were just talking about you. We decided you must have been Indian in a former life.” Perhaps this was why I felt so at home? At any rate, I could not have known then in 2001 that India would become an important part of the next chapter of my life.

But first I have to take a step back and talk a little bit about my efforts to create “Giving Voice To Values,” (GVV) an innovative approach to values-driven leadership development. I have spent most of my adult career in the field of business education and leadership development, with a particular emphasis upon ethics and values. I spent ten years from 1985—95 at Harvard Business School, as case writer, Manager of the Case Development Program and eventually as faculty, collaborating in the design and teaching of that school's ethics program. After leaving HBS, I subsequently spent over a decade, advising and consulting other educators on the integration of ethics and values into their business programs. And yet, I was troubled by the limitations of my own and others' approach to this essential subject. And as I said, I am an earnest person. My dissatisfaction led to what I often call a “crisis of faith” a number of years ago. I felt that my efforts were not making a positive difference and in fact, I was uncomfortable with what felt like an insincerity in the stance I found myself in when I tried to teach or talk about business ethics.

That is, I found that too often in discussions of business ethics, we share tricky ethical dilemmas as case studies, challenging the students in a classroom or the executives in a leadership development program with the question: “what would *you* do in this situation?” The problem with this approach is that it pushes participants, whether they are students or executives, to take a stand before they have considered how they might actually enact it. So they will either give me the answer they think I want to hear: for example, “I would do the right thing!” Or they may question the premise of the choice altogether: for

example, “I know what the right thing to do is, but in the real world, it’s just not possible!” or “This isn’t really an ethical question at all; it’s just business.”

Whatever stance the participants in this discussion will take, the conversation often turns out to be more about how to rationalize or excuse the “unethical” position than about how to enable the ethical one. We comforted ourselves that we were addressing ethics, but I did not believe we were actually helping anyone voice their values in their professional lives. So in discouragement, I decided to pause in this work. I felt that life is short and I wanted to do something that truly mattered, so perhaps I was laboring in the wrong vineyard. An overly intellectualized conversation about ethical philosophy, or a conversation that swung between the extreme poles of naïvite to cynicism with no middle ground, did not seem to be helping prepare anyone for responsible and ethical practice..

Over the span of several more years, however, I began to hatch a new approach to teaching about values-driven leadership. Rather than asking the question “what is the right thing to do?” in a particular situation, or even the question “would *you* do the right thing?”, I began to think we might do well to ask “once you know what’s right, *how* can you get it done?” That is, rather than focusing on preaching or even on intellectual debate, we could focus on action, on building persuasive “scripts” and implementation plans. We could feature positive examples of times when managers had, in fact, found effective ways to act on their values, not pretending that this was easy or that everyone did so, but rather trying to learn from what had worked for these individuals. And instead of focusing on philosophical debates about what was ethical, we could apply what we already know about how to be persuasive; how to influence others; how to build an effective argument; how to marshal evidence and data in the service of our position; how to re-frame a debate; and so on.

Once I stumbled upon this frankly simply but nevertheless powerful idea – that is, that we needed to ask a new question about ethics and values – the rest of the process seemed to fall into place. We developed a whole set of brief scenarios and teaching plans, exercises and readings, and eventually a book from Yale University Press (www.GivingVoiceToValuesTheBook.com). We made the curriculum available on line for free to all faculty (www.GivingVoiceToValues.org) and we invited educators from around the globe to experiment with it. And we have been overwhelmed by the positive response. As of this writing, the curriculum and pedagogy has been piloted in well over 400 educational and organizational settings on all seven continents and we receive almost daily inquiries about it. And although originally developed for use in graduate business classrooms, it is now being used in executive education, corporate training programs on leadership and on ethics, undergraduate business education, and increasingly in other professions as well, such

as law, engineering, accounting and so on.

But I want to come back, full circle, to the lessons from India that have influenced my work with GVV. Fairly quickly after launching this curriculum and pedagogy, I began to encounter a new form of resistance and doubt. Many educators would say to me: “Well, Mary, this approach to training and education about values-driven leadership might work in some parts of the world, in the Western economy, but it won’t work across cultural differences and it especially will not work in regions that wrestle with ubiquitous corruption.” And I must admit that I was not sure if they might be right. I really did not know if GVV was portable and whether it would appeal beyond my own borders.

However, I quickly began to be invited to share the approach in other parts of the world and found that GVV was very well-received. I have some ideas about why this is so: that is, GVV starts from a position of respect, from the conviction that we all have values, rather from a belief that we need to tell others what their values should be. And GVV acknowledges that contexts are different and that although this does not mean that people in different parts of the world do not have values or want to act on them, but it may mean that they need to develop different ways to do so that are likely to be effective in their contexts.

But I want to take a moment here to talk in particular about my experiences in India. Some of GVV’s first and most steadfast supporters have been educators and practitioners in India. And these individuals were definitely not naïve. In fact, they often would react first to me and my ideas about GVV with skepticism. They would share tales of ethical transgressions and the frequency of bribery and other types of corruption they had seen or experienced. They would describe the cynicism of their students or their workplace colleagues. But then, after sharing all of these concerns and doubts and objections, they would nevertheless embrace the goals and the approach of “Giving Voice To Values.” They would work with me to develop GVV case scenarios set in India, and to promote the use of the approach in Indian business schools. They would invite me to speak about GVV in their institutions. I was struck by this seeming contradiction; this tension between an open-eyed acknowledgment of unethical behavior and a willingness, even eagerness, to embrace and experiment with GVV.

I came to realize that I just needed to be open. I needed to acknowledge the reality of the challenges these students and business practitioners described because if I denied that, they would consider me naïve, uninformed or worse, disrespectful. I needed to acknowledge the difficulty of the path I was describing, and then I needed to simply share what I call the “GVV Thought Experiment.” That is, I would not ask them to say they would always act

ethically but instead I would share a real scenario and simply ask: “WHAT IF you wanted to act ethically in this situation? How might you get that done? What could you say? To whom? In what sequence? What data would you need to gather to bolster your position? What allies could you enlist? What examples could you draw upon? How could you reframe the decision and the stakes in a way that would appeal to more of your colleagues?”

I found that by inviting this kind of creativity and innovative thinking, without denying the challenges they faced, my Indian colleagues – faculty, business practitioners, students -- would become engaged with the possibility of a different reality. There seemed to be a genuine desire for the world to be different, along with a determination to deal and act in the “real world.” I found this uncommon marriage of idealism with pragmatism, of aspiration with practicality, to be extremely appealing and a welcome fit with my own predilections and personality. I think it was this same earnest desire to face reality squarely (for example, my own parents' fallibility) coupled with a hope for and commitment to a better world (one where I could honestly respond to that reality with my sister), that marked my personality as a child. And I am honored and proud to find a similar duality in my Indian colleagues. I hope to continue to work with business educators and business practitioners there to expand the work in Indian business schools and in Indian businesses, and to achieve the goals of the Giving Voice To Values initiative: that is, to enable more of us to not only know what is right, but to feel confident, competent and motivated to make it happen.

About the Author

MARY C. GENTILE, Ph.D is Director of Giving Voice To Values, an innovative global curriculum for values-driven leadership development at Babson College, USA. Previously Gentile was a faculty member and manager of case research at the Harvard Business School. Gentile is leading a pioneering approach to values-driven leadership development that has been featured in *Financial Times*, *Harvard Business Review* (twice), *strategy+business*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *McKinsey Quarterly*, *BizEd*, among many others, and is being piloted in over 125 business schools and organizations globally.

In her ten-year tenure at Harvard Business School, she developed and taught the school's first course on managing diversity, and helped design and taught its first required module on ethical decision-making. She has written several books on ethics and diversity. She lives in Arlington, Massachusetts.