

# Celebrating 25 Years at the EthicsCentre

AN AFTERNOON WITH DR. MARY GENTILE  
SUMMARIZED BY MIMI MARROCCO



On November 25th, the EthicsCentre celebrated 25 years of engagement with the business community in Canada. The occasion was marked by a special event with featured guest speaker Dr. Mary Gentile, Senior Researcher and Director of the “Giving Voice to Values” program at Babson College.

In her opening address to a luncheon gathering of some 100 attendees, Dr. Gentile pointed out that speaking your mind when you know what’s right is not just about principles – it’s also about practice. Nearly everyone, she told us, has been asked at some point in their business or even in their personal lives, to “do something that they thought was wrong”. When graduate business students were questioned about their own experience in this regard, their responses fell into three categories: about 1/3 replied: **it bothered me but I did it**. Another third were “bothered – and left”. The final group said that when they encountered this type of conflict, they actually tried to do something about it. Some failed in their attempt, but others succeeded.

It was this group, the small percentage of respondents who not only tried to speak their values, but succeeded in doing so, that inspired the development of a process

or blueprint, to enable others to do the same. Considered “revolutionary” in ethics education, the “Giving Voice to Values” (GVV) approach asks a new question.

Rather than the more traditional “what is the right thing to do”, GVV asks: “once you know what **you believe** is right, how do you put it into action”? And the answer? You practice. You ask yourself, “what if I was asked to do something that bothers me?” Not unlike the thinking behind the popular *Seven Habits Of Highly Successful People*, Dr. Gentile’s theory relies on developing good habits for acting on your ethics.

Her work grew out of what she perceived to be a need to “create a technology to prepare people to act”. That technology or template begins with a set of questions. Not the usual questions, aimed at determining an ethical course of action, but questions aimed at actually

taking the steps needed to **follow** one course of action, rather than another. When you believe you know what's right, she suggests, ask yourself: "If I act on my values, what's at risk for all involved?" "What are the reasons and rationalizations that I can expect from my organization to potentially **dissuade** me from acting on my values?"

Once you've asked (and answered) your own questions, prepare an action plan. What strategies might you employ to get certain actions done? What are the barriers to those actions? Is there a way to get around them? Dr. Gentile concluded her remarks to the luncheon audience by positioning GVV as a thought experiment to be repeated as often as necessary until such time as speaking out and acting on your values becomes habitual.

For those who were able to spend an entire afternoon with Dr. Gentile, she offered a workshop which introduced the seven principles that form the basis of the GVV method. The first of these is an understanding of the difference between values that are universally shared (core values) and those that are particular to an individual (my own thing).

When speaking out, it's advisable to demonstrate alignment of individual values with universal ones like integrity, justice and fairness. Dr. Gentile next referred to the principle of choice. Sometimes we choose to act on our values, but there are times when we do not. What are the enablers of a decision to act and what are the disablers? By appreciating the difference, we may come to a decision to act on our values more easily and more often.

The third principle of GVV is aligned with purpose. By defining our work more broadly than simply making a living, or in other words by articulating the meaning or purpose of our work, we will be more inclined to

give voice to our values. This in turn will encourage us to develop strategies to act on those values when and if required to do so. Dr. Gentile calls the fourth principle "normalization". If we expect to encounter values conflicts we will be prepared to deal with them, calmly and competently. "Overreaction", she suggests, "can limit your choices unnecessarily."

In her book of the same name, Gentile calls the fifth principle of GVV, "playing to my strengths". Know yourself, she tells us. Be true to your self-image and take the time to generate a self-story or personal narrative that aligns with your unique strengths. For example, she suggests that if you see yourself as a pragmatist, your action plan for voicing your values should be grounded in the practical.

The next principle is specifically about finding your voice and practicing your message, using what she describes as "the style of expression with which you are most skilful and which is most

appropriate to the situation."

Last, but certainly not least, Dr. Gentile reminded workshop participants that there will always be objections and rationalizations, even so called "good reasons" for not acting on your values. The final principle of GVV accordingly addresses the importance of recognizing these for what they are and being prepared, if necessary, to take the long view. If we can't change the world – or the organization – today, at least we can act according to what we believe to be right and just maybe, make a difference tomorrow.

A detailed description of the Giving Voice to Values curriculum and case studies is available at [www.GivingVoiceToValues.org](http://www.GivingVoiceToValues.org). *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak your Mind When you Know What's Right* is published by Yale University Press, 2010.

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