



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

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## EPISODE 29: MARY GENTILE – GIVING VOICE TO VALUES

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### Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Applying ethical behavior to everyday business life can be challenging, especially when it's tied to the bottom line. But when leaders have the tools to openly discuss and address ethical issues in the workplace, positive outcomes are likely to occur. Our guest today is the author of Giving Voice to Values GVV. The program helps professionals hone their ability to identify ethical issues and voice constructive concern when placed in ethical situations. GVV was first taught in business schools. Now it's used in businesses and organizations across the world. Mary Gentile is the author of Giving Voice to Values. She joins us today on the podcast.

### Ken White

Mary, thank you for being here today. Giving voice to values. What is that?

### Mary Gentile

Well, I'm delighted to be here, Ken. Giving voice to values is a new approach, an innovative approach to values-driven leadership development. You know, I created it as a way hopefully to transform the way we talk about leadership and values in business schools. What's happened over the last ten years or so is that this approach has really caught on and moved well beyond business schools. It's being used all over the world in companies and business schools. Now we're starting to branch out to law schools and engineering schools. But the heart of it the you know if you don't remember anything else about giving voice to values. The thing to remember it's about asking and answering a different question when it comes to values-driven leadership. So instead of asking the typical question, which is what is the right thing to do in any particular situation. That's a good question. It's an important question, but giving voice to values asks once you know what's right. How do you get it done effectively in your organizations and hopefully in a way that maintains the relationships with the people you need to work with and is not, as

they say, a career-limiting move? So it's really much more about action, problem-solving, implementation than it is about, strictly speaking, ethical analysis.

Ken White

And why did you start it? What. Where'd it come from?

Mary Gentile

Well, I started it because I'd been working in this field for quite a while. I spent ten years at Harvard Business School. When I left there in the mid-90s, I started consulting to other business schools and organizations around values and leadership, and ethics, and I frankly got, I had a crisis of faith. I began to I was basically disillusioned and discouraged by the impact of what we were trying to do with all good intentions because we tended to approach ethics as if it was entirely a cognitive thing. It was all about if you knew what was right, then everything would be hunky dory, and you know, in fact, what I was seeing that, sure, there were situations where people weren't sure what was right. But there were a lot of situations where people actually did have a pretty good sense that there's something dodgy here, but they didn't necessarily feel like they had any choice. And I said, oh boy, if we could make an impact there, we would have gone so far down the road, you know. And so I was discouraged because I thought the way we were approaching it was limited. I didn't have another idea until I came up with GWV.

Ken White

So is this under the heading of ethics leadership following communication? Where do you put that? For those of us who need to categorize things.

Mary Gentile

Right. Right. Well, people will categorize it where they will. I can tell you where I categorize it. I call it values-driven leadership development. And I do that because what I find is if you label something ethics, people tend to think of it as a set of rules, a code that's outside themselves. It's all about constraints on action. People who build enterprises people who are successful in business, constraints on action is not what they're all about. They're really interested in can do. And so, by framing it around values, it's really more about something that's aspirational that comes from within. That's about the stuff you actually care about and maybe don't always feel like you can implement.

Ken White

So are many of your clients. Are they more leaders, or are they more people who report to leaders?

Mary Gentile

It's both. So it's sort of interesting, actually. Many of the in a business school, of course, we're talking about students.

Ken White

Right.

Mary Gentile

But I designed the program to appeal to faculty because I knew that those they were the gatekeepers, and I never met a faculty member who didn't care about these issues, but they didn't necessarily feel like they knew how to teach around them effectively. When it comes to businesses, they will usually come to me. Individuals and business will usually come to me and think this is about empowering and directing the actions of their middle managers and their lower managers, and people will even say look, you know we wouldn't get to be senior leaders if we didn't know what our values were and how to act on them. What tends to happen is as people begin talking about giving voice to values in their organizations, they realize there's actually an important role for this for senior leaders and a lot of times for senior leaders. The issue is. Actually, it's a threefold thing. On the one hand they, they need to learn to voice their values to their senior peers because these are people that they can't really antagonize. These are people that they need to collaborate with. And so that's a skill. It's not about how ethical they are, but it's about how effective they are at talking across at that high level. The second thing for senior leaders is they need to think about how do I build a culture that will enable this in my reports. But the third thing, and the one where I've gotten the most traction with leaders, is how do I hear it when my reports come to me with a values issue. You know it's never good news. It always comes at a bad time. Sometimes it comes with a price tag, you know. And so there are a kind of two components here. One is self-management. You know how do I avoid killing the messenger, right? Because that goes a long way to silencing your organization. And that's exactly what you don't want. And then the other thing is how do I give a message to the manager who raised a values issue with me that I'm taking it seriously that I'm glad they came? But I need to do my own due diligence and you give that message in a way that they don't feel brushed off because often, as leaders when we want to make sure that what we're hearing is actually true that the individual has a whole story that they're not they don't have their own axe to grind. Sometimes when you're trying to hold back a little, the person who brought the message says, yeah yeah, she doesn't really want to hear this. She's not gonna do anything.

Ken White

Yeah, interesting.

## Mary Gentile

And so we've reframed the experience for leaders to be that way. I was recently worked with a major multinational corporation, and we were piloting a project in one of their regions, and the leaders there were really quite. I thought innovative and a little courageous because they said let's have the conversation together with the middle management and the leadership team in the room at the same time. And what we did is we had the leaders talk about how can you raise these issues with me in a way that makes it easier for me to respond effectively. And we had the middle management talking about how can I raise them effectively and what do I want from the senior leaders. And then we debrief together, and it was such an exciting session because it really was, you know, an implicit. I didn't have to ask for it. But this implicit sort of I'll do this if you do that kind of conversation going on it was very empowering.

## Ken White

What are some of the issues? Are there themes or repetitive issues you come across in various businesses?

## Mary Gentile

Yeah. So it depends on the industry you're in. It depends on the region you're working in. There are certain issues that you hear again and again, you know, having to do with pressures around sales, pressures around sales reporting, pressures around, you know, balancing our desire to meet our quotas with our commitment to our customers that sometimes gets into quality issues you know or how far are we going to push. A lot of the issues end up being interpersonal issues where people feel they're they don't know how to communicate in a way from both angles from below and above in the organization about sensitive issues in a way that you still feel respected. So senior management sometimes will feel like it's expressed as insubordination, and the lower level managers feel like senior leaders don't want to hear what they have to say and don't respect them that way. And so there's this real challenge. And then when you go global, especially if you're working with a multinational, if you're in an emerging economy setting, they feel like corporate doesn't care. Corporates usually, you know, somewhere in the US or in Western Europe, and they don't care, you know, and they're not listening to the ground. That's how they feel. And yet then, when they end up having, you know, quotas to fill, and they feel that this product doesn't work for this environment, they feel set up. And so it ends up creating this antagonistic. So a lot of GVV, I mean, you know, we're talking about values, we're talking about ethics, but a lot of times, it's really about being able to function in a way that's going to make you more effective for the bottom line.

## Ken White

Sure, yeah.

## Mary Gentile

So it's a been kind of exciting journey that way to see those lines get crossed.

## Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Mary Gentile on giving voice to values in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. If you're looking to improve your leadership and business skills, the Center for Corporate Education has a terrific program scheduled in April. The certificate in business management. It's a five-day program for professionals that covers strategy, accounting, operational effectiveness, communication, and leadership. For more information, go to [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Now back to our conversation with Mary Gentile on giving voice to values.

## Ken White

So when a middle manager or someone who reports to a middle manager may go in to meet with you one of your workshops, they're going in asking, you know what's in it for me. What is in it for them? What do they do? What are they looking for?

## Mary Gentile

Yeah, yeah. I'll give you an example. I was recently in Africa in, I won't name the company, but in a major corporation in one of their sites, and I was doing a reconnaissance trip, you know, where I was trying to identify what the issues were. And so I was doing interviews and focus groups with middle managers. And you know, you can imagine I walked into the room, and this was to set up a, you know, what they were seeing as an ethics training quote unquote. And you know, so people kind of have their heads down, and their eyes are clouded, and they're looking at their phones, you know, and all you have to do is set it up acknowledging that it's hard to do this. Acknowledging rather than coming in saying I'm here to help you be more ethical, I'm here to make you less corrupt, or whatever the issue is. Instead, to say you know, I know you have values; I know they're not always easy to act on. So what I'd like to do is hear about times when you've tried to act on your values and you were successful, and we can talk about why that was true. Hear about times when you tried and you were unsuccessful, and we can talk about why that was true. Hear about, well, I call them enablers and disablers. What enable do to do this effectively when you did what disabled you when you were unable? So the whole thing is you're coming from rather than a policing or even preaching perspective but more from an enabling perspective. So what I've found with corporations is that you know, often their ethics and compliance people will reach out to me. But increasingly, they're seeing this less as an ethics and compliance thing and more as leadership development.

## Ken White

Wow, very interesting.

Mary Gentile

And that's where I want it to go.

Ken White

Yeah. And you say global, you're doing multinational what kind of a role does that culture from various countries? How does that? That's gotta mess things up, doesn't it?

Mary Gentile

Yeah, yeah. When I first started doing this business school, faculty in the US and Western Europe said this might work here. It's never going to work in Asia, Africa, South America, China, India. I actually do a lot of work in those areas. GVV giving voice to values I call it GVV is now being used on all seven continents, including the Antarctic, and yes, of course, there are cultural differences, but there's been great reception, and I've learned that it has to do with a couple of things we acknowledge context. We don't pretend that your context is the same as mine. We start from a position of respect, as I was saying earlier. We start from the position of saying look. I'm not here, Mary Gentile, to tell you what your values should be. I'm here saying I know you have values, and they're not always easy to act on. I want to help us develop strategies, tactics, tools, levers, skills, scripts so that you are, in fact, better able to act on the values that you want to act on. Then I introduce them to something called the giving voice to values thought experiment, which is really at the heart of this work where I don't give you a scenario and say what should you do or what would you do. I give you a scenario where there's a protagonist who's already decided what they think is right, and I say how could he or she get it done in that environment. What what are the pushback? What's the they call them the reasons and rationalizations? What's the pushback they'll encounter? What's at risk for everyone involved, including the person they're trying to influence? Where are the levers? How could they reframe it? So the whole conversation, none of it is ethics, really. None of it is philosophy, certainly. The whole conversation is implementation. I think that's why companies have been so attracted to this approach. They're used to presenting their values and ethics training as a set of rules. And then there's some scenarios, and you discuss whether this is over the line or not. And with GVV, that's not what we do. I mean, they need to know what the rules are. But that's easy to communicate. You can read it you can do it online. With giving voice to values, what we do is say okay. We know what we want to do here. We also know that in this context, there's going to be some specific barriers to that.

Ken White

Yeah.

## Mary Gentile

Or maybe you just have a boss who's difficult, or maybe you have a customer who really pressuring you and asking for a quid pro quo or whatever it is. How could you handle that in a way that's going to be effective for all the parties? So I think that's a lot of it.

## Ken White

And so that's the bulk of what you'll be doing throughout, say, a day with a company that sort of.

## Mary Gentile

A lot of what I do with companies is I teach them the approach first of all. There's a set of questions, and it's basically a reframe. You know, it's like asking a different question people will automatically default to debating whether it's wrong or not. So you have to keep bringing them back to. No no. This is about what, if you thought this was the right thing to do, how could you get it done. And then I have, you know, I try to have custom scenarios that are relevant to their organization and engage them in solving them. The great thing about giving voice to values for the trainer or the faculty member or for me is you don't have to have the answers. You have to have the right questions, and you have to have the ability to keep bringing the conversation back. I remember doing a program a few years ago in Australia with a group of public sector CEOs. They were CEOs of public sector organizations, so you know, child welfare and nutrition, you know, and we had a bunch of scenarios, and we asked them, and I introduced the GWV method, and then I gave them these scenarios, and at first they were very skeptical, but then they started working on them, and for them, the big issue was usually that their boss who was an elected official was asking them to do something that was going to get that person elected again. It was popular, but they had these CEOs had the deep knowledge of their area, and they were really committed to the public good and knew that sometimes what was popular was actually not going to be in the services of the public. And so they had to find a way to play that line. And so we had some of these scenarios, and they started working on them. And once they got into it, they came up with all these great approaches, and when they shared them, you know, what we pointed out is look, you know, all the things you used to resolve these issues which would have turned into scandals if you hadn't. All the tools you used were the very tools that got you promoted to be a CEO in the first place because you had a command of power and influence, you knew how to negotiate, you're very persuasive, you can reframe problems, you know how to enlist allies, you can build partnerships, and you know once they recognized these are the skills I have. But sometimes, when we talk about ethics, we put everything aside that we know how to do as managers and leaders, and we think this as a test of character.

## Ken White

Right, sure.

Mary Gentile

Go, no go, am I a good or bad person?

Ken White

Yeah.

Mary Gentile

And we actually dumb ourselves down. And so what this is about is actually saying no use the same skills you use for anything else you know but use it in the service of a values-based position.

Ken White

We're seeing so many millennials come into the workforce now, do they? And it's a generalization. Of course, we just had a recent podcast about millennials, and you hate to generalize.

Mary Gentile

I know, but we do.

Ken White

We do, yeah. Do they view values differently than the boomers?

Mary Gentile

Yeah, it's kind of interesting. There's been a lot of research, and I don't know who you were interviewing, but there's been a lot of research suggesting that this generation has kind of got this sort of sense of both I can do anything that's kind of a youth characteristic anyway but also that they should be doing something that's you know socially responsible, environmentally responsible. Everyone has their own theories about it. You know, I think some of it is, you know, climate change is sort of people are seeing this may impact my life you know in the, in the near term nearer term than my generation, but for whatever reason there tends to be this kind of sense of you know bigger purpose at the same time. You know, there's a kind of naivete sometimes about how you're going to get that done. There's; also we've also a lot of the research about this generation suggesting that they kind of want, you know, steps they want to be trained, you know, they don't want you to just throw them in there. And so one of the nice things about GWV is that you can tie it to any values that they're committed to, but in fact, there is process, and they get to practice, and they get to play with it. Some of the faculty who teach younger students who use this approach have really tied it to. You know something they might be encountering. I worked with the director of athletics at Babson College, for example, and we worked with the captains of all the various teams, and we said, look, you know, this is supposed to be a



leadership position. What are some of the leadership challenges that you're facing as the captain of your team? And they were things like substance abuse and harassment, and bullying.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mary Gentile

But they didn't necessarily feel equipped to deal with them. And so, for them, this was very empowering. So yeah, you know, there are some distinctions, but I think that for millennials, the trick is to tie it to something they're excited about, and then they see it as enabling them rather than again a set of thou shalt not.

Ken White

Right. If a listener is interested, you have a book they can start right there, right, or the website. Can you tell us about both?

Mary Gentile

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. The book is Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right. It was a Yale University Press. The website is just [givingvoicetovaluesthebook.com](http://givingvoicetovaluesthebook.com), and if you go there, there's videos, these interviews, there's articles. The book is there there's a whole curriculum that you can link to it's all free. We have a series of online interactive modules that are social core based lots of materials.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Mary Gentile on giving voice to values, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level in your career with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, check out our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). That's [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Thanks to our guest this week, Mary Gentile, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.