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PRactical Advice on Engaging Values to Avoid Causing Harm

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Like superpowers, entrepreneurship is a tool that can be used for good or for evil. Throughout our lives, we have built up values that can be highly influential in the choices we make in running our businesses. However, there is a danger: we can play some mental games that allow us to do bad things without considering ourselves bad people. For example, we may value the natural environment yet pursue opportunities that harm it. The key is to catch ourselves playing these mental games of self-deception so we do not act in ways that violate our values.

Flowing from my research (listed below) I offer the following advice for engaging values when making a decision on whether to exploit an opportunity:

1. Mental games that deceive us into violating our values
   - Deceptively reducing the harm from our conduct. Before we act in ways that cause harm, we may try and convince ourselves that our actions are acceptable because they serve a larger purpose. In this way, we deceive ourselves by thinking we are good despite doing bad things. We facilitate this self-deception by using language and labels that hide the harm or even put a positive spin on it. By using a neutral (or even positive) label, we are trying to minimize the harm created by our actions. We can also deceptively attempt to minimize the harm from our entrepreneurial actions by comparing them to the more harmful actions of others. In framing our actions relative to more harmful actions, we attempt to deceive ourselves that our actions are not very harmful and even positive in a relative sense. Therefore, by attempting to frame our actions in terms of a “greater good,” using positive spin to describe our actions, and comparing our actions with those that cause greater harm, we are playing a mind game to try and release us from the obligations of our values. We need to recognize these attempts to circumvent our values and make sure we engage our values in making important entrepreneurial decisions.
   - Misplacing responsibility for the harm. We sometimes avoid conflict with our values by hiding or minimizing our role in the harm caused. We can do this by convincing ourselves that we had little choice but to undertake the action: if it is not within our control, then we cannot hold ourselves responsible for the outcome. We may also convince ourselves that we are only one person of a management team that makes the decision. This diffusion of responsibility allows us to think of ourselves as good despite our business doing bad things. By ignoring the harm we create or somehow discounting or distorting its impact, we can let ourselves “off the hook” for our harmful actions. By misplacing responsibility for the harm we create by our actions, we deceive ourselves in a way that allows us to act in ways that violate our own values. Don’t be
tricked by these self-deceptive attempts to obfuscate responsibility for the harm; we need to use our values to guide our entrepreneurial decisions and actions.

- **Blaming the victims.** We sometimes avoid conflict with our values by devaluing the victims of our actions, whether those victims are the individuals most impacted by our actions or the natural environment. We can do this by categorizing victims into a group of lesser worth, in which case the harm is considered less, or by blaming the victims themselves for their own circumstances, in which case we believe they are getting what they deserve (also serving to absolve us of responsibility). We deceive ourselves by blaming the victims in order to inappropriately justify acting in ways that violate our own values. When we find ourselves blaming the victim, we need to recognize this as a sign of self-deception and re-double our efforts to use our values in the entrepreneurial decision process.

2. **Be on guard when you believe you can make a difference**

- **We are vulnerable to violating values when we have a strong belief that we can achieve entrepreneurial success.** When we believe we have the ability to be successful in exploiting opportunities, we are more susceptible to the mind games that deceive us about opportunities that will cause harm if exploited. We are driven to use our abilities (what we believe we are good at), and if our values stand in the way of taking such actions, we tend to use mind games to avoid our values and act on opportunities that cause others harm. Therefore, the entrepreneurial tasks and opportunities we believe we can successfully execute are the very tasks and opportunities for which we need to be extra vigilant to engage our values to guide our decisions and actions.

- **We are vulnerable to violating values when the environment is hostile.** When an environment is hostile there are few opportunities to act, and thus our decision of whether or not to act on a specific opportunity is going to be particularly impactful (compared to an attractive environment where opportunities are plentiful). Indeed, in hostile environments, we are particularly vulnerable to using mind games to deceive ourselves in order to act on the opportunity even if it causes harm. Therefore, in hostile environments, we have to be particularly mindful to engage our values in our entrepreneurial decisions to act.

We have values and these values are meant to guide our important decisions. For example, most of us value the natural environment and these values should influence our thinking such that we do not act on opportunities that are going to cause harm. But we have an ability to play mind games such that we can disengage our values and deceive ourselves that our actions will not cause harm or the harm will be minimal (or even beneficial). We are particularly vulnerable to these mind games when we have a strong belief in our ability to successfully exploit opportunities and when the industry is hostile. But it is in
these times that we need to be extra vigilant to ensure that we engage our values in our decisions about whether or not to pursue opportunities that might cause harm.

**Bibliography**

The motivation for this note was to share some of the practical implications of my research, specifically: