

What are Values and how do they Help Us?

“Values are shaping ideas.... At testing times when people confront the possibility – and threat – of great change, powerful fundamental values are evoked” (Burns)

“Values refer to what people consider to be important” (Roccas et al)

Values are our cultural ‘operating system’, a set of subconscious principles reflecting our most



important emotional needs. They define our self-concept, who, and what, we are; creating our character, forming our attitudes and driving our behaviour. Underpinned by our most fundamental beliefs, values are derived from the judgements we make about right and wrong, good and bad. They guide the stand we take, and how strongly we are motivated to act. Sometimes referred to as our moral compass, values can be seen as a prism through which our

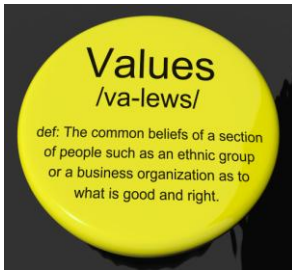
judgements are reflected. Values cannot be taught but are implicit and internalised, learned in particular from the actions of ‘significant others’, our role models.

Academic research has suggested that there are ten Universal values that are common to mankind: Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Achievement, Power, Security, Conformity, Tradition, Benevolence and Universalism. Different cultures apply different weighting to different values, for example Western culture emphasises the individualistic values; Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism and Achievement, whereas, Eastern culture emphasises the opposing collective values; Conformity, Tradition and Benevolence. As a result, inter-cultural communication can be challenging and not just at the global level.

Values are directly related to our basic psychological needs of *Belonging*, *Competence* and *Autonomy*. People need to feel that they have a collective identity, that they are good at whatever their chosen group does and that they are able to act freely to seek self-actualisation. This is why personal and organisational values need to have a degree of congruence. People need to feel that they are working toward a common purpose, and able to develop toward shared goals. Where there is dissonance between personal and organisational values, satisfaction and commitment will be limited. Alignment of values is essential for effective performance and harmonious relationships. Suffice to say, we are defined and driven by our largely subconscious values.

The power of values lies in putting emphasis on ‘How’ to act rather than ‘What’ to do. Values are best articulated as abstract ideals that interact within our subconscious to influence our judgement and attitudes. Our attitudes influence our behaviours and our performance.

Mostly, our values are fixed early in life; they are not changed without conscious effort and significant emotional persuasion. They subconsciously influence our actions regardless of context. Universal values are by their very nature generic and lack specific application. It is helpful for practitioners, to use more definitive language when articulating ideals. Clarity of meaning makes it easier to achieve a clearer reflection of our self-concept i.e. who and what we perceive ourselves to be, as groups and as individuals within groups. Consequently, we can ‘see’ more effectively and reinforce our values based behaviour.



Our language informs our reality and so our language in relation to our values must be carefully crafted. It is not uncommon for organisations to use statements of behaviour rather than values in their values statements. For example: “Developing good partnering and working”, “Ensuring no waste” and “Practicing efficient and effective team working”. The very specific nature of these statements has the effect of limiting the agility of response to the *Volatile*,

Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) realities of 21c life. More importantly, it reduces the autonomy necessary for people to act on their values based initiative and therefore constrains ownership and intrinsic motivation.

Describing values as nouns or verbs is another common way of articulating values: *Courage*, *Integrity* and *Loyalty*. However, this fails to accentuate the emotional connection, which is the essence of value power. Values are most effectively articulated as adjectives because they relate specifically to our intrinsic selves and as such, they define us. Try running your values past the ‘I am’ or ‘We are’ test: “I am *Courageous*”, “We are *Honourable*” and “I am *Loyal*”. Note the change of the language from *Integrity* to *Honourable*. Integrity is often referred to as a core value but it’s meaning is often confused with honesty. ‘We are *Honourable*’ has the same meaning, but is easier to translate into behaviour. *Trust* is another commonly ‘misused’ value word. Trust refers to a relational outcome of being *Reliable*, a more effective word for describing the principle.

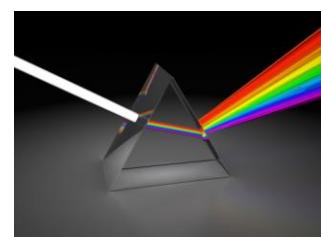
It has been estimated that we have an average of 25 values influencing our self-concept. These groups of values are mutually supporting and can be thought of as ‘Sets’, providing the ‘software’ or ‘code’ for our personal identity and organisational culture. Value sets are in effect the foundations of culture. A leader’s vision statement should contain explicit reference to the core values in order to articulate its inspirational emotional appeal.

In organisational terms it may be helpful to view values at two levels: Core and Functional.

Core values are the preeminent values providing the strategic meaning for the organisation. For example a police force might have *Positive, Fair and Courageous* as it’s core values.

Functional Values are the remaining values within the culture. They interact to influence the operational function of the organisation and are prone to shift in emphasis subject to situation. Staying with the police example: *Respectful, Disciplined, Patient, Safe, Honest, Discreet, Accountable, Open, Restrained and Proud*.

The values, either personal or within an organisation, are ordered in a hierarchical way and are given varying levels of emphasis depending on the context, for example *Safe* may take precedence over *Independent* in dangerous situations. Both are, however, *active* within the value set. Values are subconsciously ‘activated’ and raised up the hierarchy because of situational cues reflecting on our cultural prism and triggering deep-seated subconscious emotional responses – I like/dislike, I agree/disagree.



A culture is made up of all the values in the set, all are 'active' in the creation of '*feels right*'. The core values are preeminent at all times, underpinning the soul of the organisation. The functional values vary in emphasis in relation to each other given any particular situation or special role. 'Teams within teams' are typically driven by differing functional value priorities with the core values providing unity of purpose. Role clarity is an essential prerequisite of effective high performing teams as it enables emphasis on specific values and reduces value incongruence. For example the R&D department places greater emphasis on *Innovative*, whereas the finance department places greater emphasis on *Prudent*. Where sub-group functional values or personal functional values clash with other sub-group functional values or organisational functional values a compromise needs to be sought. Usually that compromise, carried as 'risk', will influence performance. Terminal challenge occurs where sub-group or personal values clash with the organisational core values.

As stated at the beginning of this piece, values cannot be taught, laminated or learned by rote. Values are the result of role model behaviour demonstrating what good looks like, so that people 'feel right' about the principle and internalise it for themselves. Once internalised those values are important to peoples' self-concept and as a result they will perform well beyond expectations to live up to them. Role modelling values is, of course, Values Based Leadership.

TimCainLeadership's mission is to help you with this.

<http://www.timcainleadership.co.uk/> Twitter @ctimboc1

The logo for Tim Cain Leadership. The name 'Tim Cain' is written in a black, cursive script font. Below it, the word 'LEADERSHIP' is written in a bold, red, sans-serif, all-caps font.