Values-based Leadership

Determining Our Personal Values

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Values are the essence of who we are as human beings. Our values get us out of bed every morning, help us select the work we do, the company we keep, the relationships we build, and, ultimately, the groups and organizations we lead. Our values influence every decision and move we make, even to the point of how we choose to make our decisions.

Purpose of Values Determination

When we honor our values, we feel alive and vital. When we ignore them, we feel forced, unnatural, out of step, and unhappy. Over time, we may feel a gradual sense of dull routine accompanied by regret for not following a different strategy.

This article deals with the impact of personal values on individuals and those they influence while serving in a leadership role such as family members, friends, social contacts, and co-workers. It relates concrete examples of observed behavior where values were ignored and examples where they were honored, understood, and applied, along with observed results. Finally, it encourages readers to define the personal values that are at the very core of *their* being — that define who *they* are as individuals and how they *choose* to lead.

Personal Values Description

Our values are the elements deep within our belief system that make us "tick." They influence every aspect of our per-

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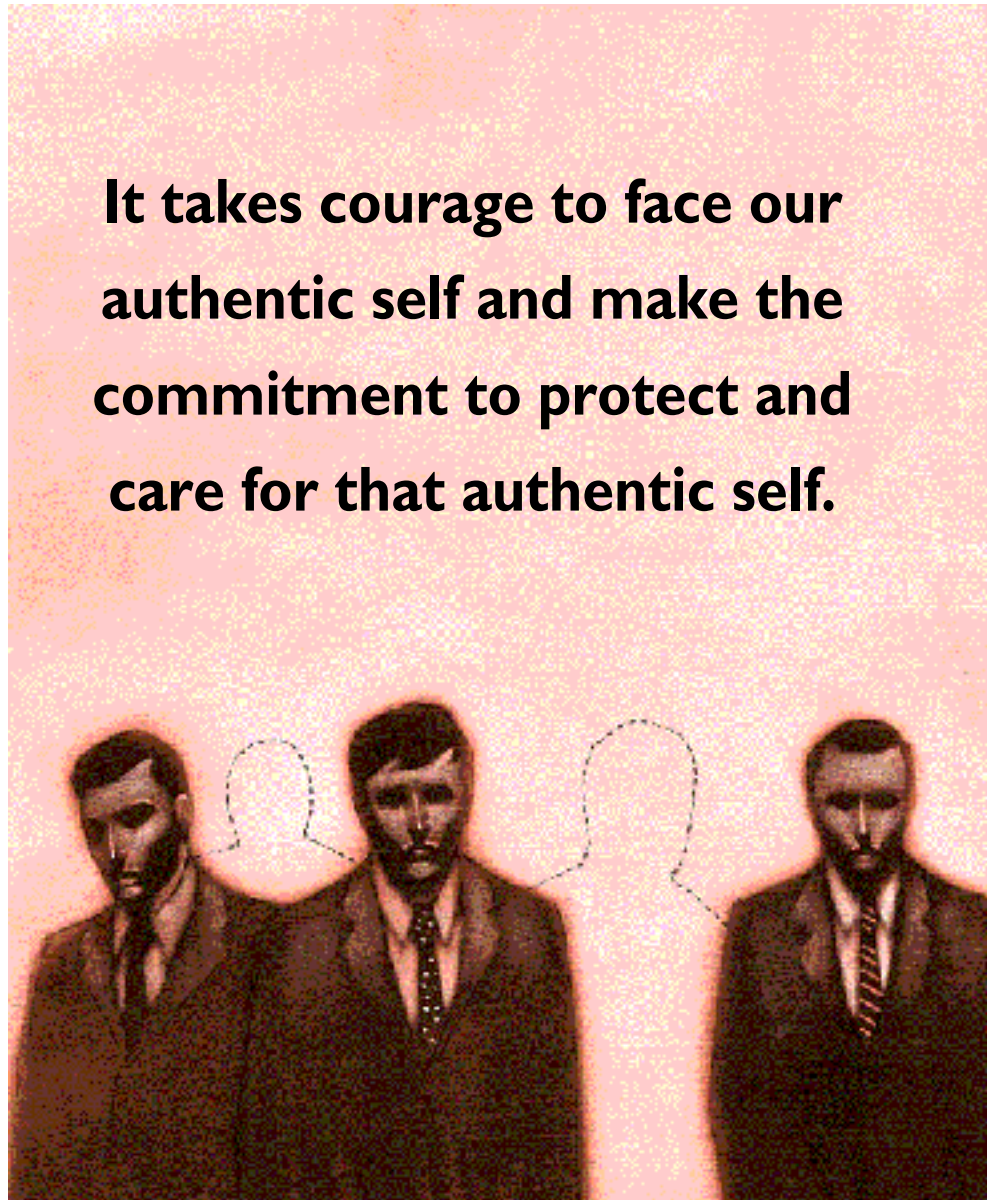
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ceived reality, from family to work and from friends to the larger world in which we live. Hyrum Smith from the Franklin-Covey Co., in his April 6, 2000, presentation to the U.S. Air Force Electronic Systems Center refers to our belief system as the screen through which our view of the everyday world is filtered.[1]

If everything we see passes through this "screen" and colors our viewpoint, doesn't it make sense to be aware of what that screen depicts? If our values play such a critical role in the perceptions we form of our world, wouldn't it be in our best interests to understand what they are and how they influence our perceptions?

Values vs. Behavior

Many years ago, while working in the insurance industry, I reported to Dick, one of my brokerage firm's senior vice presidents. Early in our working relationship while having lunch one day, he shared the following information about himself:

• He was a chain smoker.

• He was three years into his second marriage.
• He had a two-year-old daughter.
• He was 35 years old.
• He arrived at work after a two-hour commute at 7:30 a.m.
• He left for home facing a two-hour commute at 6 p.m.

• His wife objected to his long hours.
• He played golf every Saturday and Sunday in season.
• He entertained clients frequently (although he hated it).
• He enjoyed two martinis at lunch.

On the rare occasion when we were on the same train home, I noticed his drinking two beers on the train — in addition to the two martinis at lunch. To me, his behavior suggested he was self-medicating. When I asked Dick why he worked the long hours, his response was, "That's how I got to where I am. If you are smart, you'll start putting in longer hours yourself." I asked if he equated long hours with success. He claimed that he didn't. Rather, he claimed that our firm's president depended heavily upon him since the client we jointly served was the firm's largest and most demanding account.

Did this mean that I would be evaluated largely on the amount of hours I was willing to give to the firm? If I wanted to build strong relations with my clients, did I have to constantly entertain them? My heart sank. I believed that the *quality* of work equated to successful results rather than the *time* spent at work.

I enjoyed entertaining clients — *if* I liked being with them. If I didn't enjoy their company (or perceived that they didn't enjoy mine), I minimized our entertainment time. My immediate problem was that our largest client fit into the latter category. I struggled with the reconciliation of my values and what Dick seemed to perceive as my lack of professional standards of behavior.

The Values Conflict

Clearly, I had encountered a lesson in the conflict between two different sets of values. Dick seemed continually stressed, self-medicating through cigarettes and alcohol. Our conversations surfaced his personal value of being financially successful through the qualities of pure hard work and dogged, at times ruthless determination — regardless of whether the work was satisfying. It's not that Dick's values were wrong — they were just very different from mine.

To me, they seemed extreme and inflexible. There was no tolerance for anyone else's values if they were different. In fact, Dick was quite critical and judgmental when his values clashed head-on with someone else's. His assumption seemed to be that his values should have been *everyone's* values. His mind-set allowed no room for personal differences. There seemed to be no balance.

His value system forced many difficult, "either/or" choices for him. *Either* he placates his wife's wishes and works fewer hours *or* continues to be successful in providing for his family. *Either* he does less requiring him to depend on those who report directly to him (who won't work as hard), *or* the work gets done personally by him the "right" way. *Either* he pays attention to his health *or* keeps up the coping mechanisms of alcohol and tobacco in order to continue building his successful career. *Either* he stays home on weekends *or* plays golf to maintain his sanity. Is he a workaholic? Is he an alcoholic? Even if he is, isn't this the sacrifice that responsible fathers and husbands make for the sake of their families? If he gives up any part of his work, isn't he admitting weakness or incompetence? Is there a danger of losing his sense of who he really is?

Dick seemed to *force* everything. Crisis was the norm with Dick. He seemed to under-plan and to overreact. He would leave the office to catch a plane 30 minutes before the flight, paying the taxi driver extra to "Step on it!"

Dick often expressed frustration as a victim of others who forced him out of control: clients demanded too much; colleagues could not be trusted; or the firm's president leaned on him too much. Even the steno pool responded too slowly to his constant demands (interestingly, they responded quite well to the rest of us). In his book, *Stewardship*, Peter Block states, "Power is what victims want, and we are the ones they want it from. Victims believe that others, often us, hold the answer to their helplessness. If they were just given more power, or if our behavior would change in some way, then they could begin to take responsibility."

Dick had power all along. He needed to examine his values carefully to find it.

Influence of Values on Leadership

Unfortunately, Dick's value system impacted others well beyond himself. As one of Dick's employees, I felt he wanted me to reinvent myself in his image, something that seemed repugnant to me. His values and beliefs were very different from mine. And yet, my performance would be measured through his biased eyes, filtered by his value set.

When I found our firm's largest client had misrepresented a key aspect of his business to me in order to obtain insurance coverage at an advantageous rate, I saw a need to firmly set professional boundaries and expectations with the client. Dick panicked.

"How can you put this account in jeopardy? He may be a No. 1 @*!#(*! ... but he means $500,000 a year to the firm!"

"I know," I said. "*And* he put me in a position with our underwriters where my honesty and integrity is in question with them. He contends that I intentionally misrepresented his operation. Since I work with these underwriters on other client accounts, he has jeopardized my credibility with them. It could put our other clients unacceptably at risk with these underwriters."

"Forget it!" Dick exclaimed. "All of our underwriters know that he's a jerk! Don't worry about them!"

I believed in requiring the client to honestly represent his business operations. Our business was based on integrity and trust. Underwriters had to trust that our representation of a client was accurate before they would offer competitive insurance protection. Without that trust, we had very little to offer anyone.

Leadership Implications

In small groups, families, teams, large groups, or huge multinational organizations, values are *always* used as a basis for the group's operation. The question is *whose* values. From leadership style, staffing requirements, decision making, pay policies, or customer service, values shape the way the group makes decisions. The only question is *whose* set of values is at work, and whether the values are *implicit* or *explicit.*

Implicit values are much more common — *and* dangerous. They are the *assumed* values of the individual who is perceived as the one who sets the norms, such as the company's founder, the family's mother or father, or the small group's most vocal *or* neurotic member. Since the dominant person's values are implicit and left to the perceptions of everyone else, they are subject to broad interpretations and — more often than not — *mis*interpretations.

Let's imagine two firms. In the first, the chief executive officer (CEO) operates out of a clear understanding of his or her value system. Since the CEO's behavior during times of crisis is one of the prime factors in shaping the organizational culture, it is reasonable to assume that the organization will reflect the perceived values represented by the CEO's behavior.[2]

Now, imagine the second where the CEO reacts to crisis with a total lack of awareness of his or her own personal value system. The CEO's behavior appears erratic and inconsistent. Subordinates will most likely misunderstand the CEO's intentions. Often, the culture becomes one of confusion and fear as rumors and mixed signals fly throughout the environment. In a fear-based culture, creativity is the first casualty as the organization's members become increasingly risk-adverse.

Consider for a moment what kinds of employees each firm will recruit. How will decisions be made? Who will make them? How will meetings be run? How will new ideas be received? How will customers be treated? What will the quality of life in the workplace be? Will initiative be recognized or chastised? Will good results be rewarded? How will failure be handled? How will performance be measured? What will be the effects on morale? What will be the strategic impact? The implications are staggering!

In the years since I went into practice as a private consultant, I have rarely found situations where people were fired because they were technically incompetent. I have, however, found many situations where they were terminated because their value system clashed head-on with that of their supervisor or board of directors. This observation is especially true within the senior ranks of organizations. What happens in the U.S. Government's senior ranks whenever a new President takes office? Are we replacing competence or really changing the values (and over time, the culture) of those who head U.S. Government Departments and Agencies?

Our Responsibility to Ourselves

Each of us has the opportunity and choice to clarify our value system. For those of us in positions of leadership and influence such as parents, clergy, teachers, coaches, supervisors, managers, directors, or executives, when we clarify our values, we do a great service to ourselves and a great service to all of those with whom we come in contact. It takes courage to face our authentic self and make the commitment to protect and care for that authentic self. The big, fundamental question is, "Am *I* worth the effort?"

Coaching Joan

I was in private practice for 13 years when I was asked to coach a client company's director of management information systems (MIS). The division vice president described Joan (not her real name) as quiet and competent. "Her problem is that she shuts up in meetings with other senior executives at the very time that I need her opinion!"

When Joan and I met for our initial interview, I asked her how she felt about our working together. I also asked her what she *expected* and what she *wanted* to happen as a result of our working together. "I want to be vice president of MIS when we acquire ABC (not the real name) company," she said without any hesitation. "Why?" I asked.

"Because that's my next career step," she shot back.

"I may ask you to do some homework assignments that may push you out of your comfort zone. You always have the right to refuse, and that is OK. Our work is strictly confidential and will be discussed with no one unless you are present and give me your permission. Is that all right with you?" "Absolutely!" she said. "After all, this is an opportunity for me."

We agreed to a regular meeting schedule. Before leaving, I gave her a homework assignment. The assignment was to identify her primary personal values.

Joan had an immediate reaction to the assignment. "What if my values turn out to be in conflict with my work?" My response was simple: "If they are, would you rather not know? If you would rather not find out *now*, when *would* you like to find out?" A slow smile crept over Joan's face. "I get your point."

Joan's concern was understandable. What if I clarify my values only to find out that I have been living a lie? Who do I hold responsible? How do I regain lost time? Perhaps I really don't know myself! What if I discover that I have been in emotional pain and successfully "numbing out" for many years (very common for people working in jobs they hate)? Am I *worthy* of self-care?

Of course, the reverse is also something to consider. What if I gain control of the quality of my life? What if I discover that I'd rather be making my living doing something very different and *loving* it! What if I became a better parent (partner, boss, friend, or lover)? What if I find out that I am worthy of my own love and acceptance?

By tackling this assignment and dealing with these questions, Joan demonstrated considerable courage.

Determining Our Personal Values

Values and qualities are not the same. Values are who you *are*. Qualities are what you *do* in order to honor your val-

ues. For example, I am honest (quality) because I value personal integrity; I engage with people (quality) because I value their diverse viewpoints. Our values are not only those elements of our makeup that please us; they drive our qualities that others see.

As part of her homework assignment, Joan listed her most important personal values. Joan then asked her husband to create a similar list of her most important values *based upon his observations of her* within their relationship. She then asked two subordinate managers to create similar lists of her values based upon *their observations and perceptions*.

Joan was quite excited when we met again. Her list was very close to the list her husband had written. Interestingly, it varied significantly from the lists she gathered from two subordinates who reported directly to her. Most interestingly, she felt totally "in sync" with her list and the list from her husband. Conversely, she felt detached from the list given to her by those reporting directly to her.

"How do you account for the lists from those who report directly to you being so different?" I asked. "That's easy," she said. "I'm not *really* me when I come to work."

We began the search for ways in which Joan could *fully* come to work. Once Joan clearly identified her values, we began to look at what blocked her honoring them through her actions. Within a few coaching sessions, Joan shared that she had always wanted to start her own business in dog products. "Not exactly retail — more virtual," she said. She realized that her MIS background coupled with a financial settlement she had received from the company for some stock options she had exercised, technically and financially positioned her to begin her effort.

However, clarifying her values also revealed her low tolerance for risktaking. Certainly, beginning a start-up virtual business involved some risk. She developed a plan for staying at her current organization but in a different capacity.

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She found real satisfaction in project management rather than executive management and offered to leave her current position and create a new position as the MIS research and development function for her company. In this capacity, she would lead small teams in their search for high-tech solutions to the company's many challenges. This fit perfectly into the strategic planning of the division vice president.

A year later, the "complete" or authentic Joan is coming to work every day. She has helped her company recapture the technological capability it so desperately needed. Dog lovers are discovering her new Web site, while she busily explores the entrepreneurial world. Her relationships with her co-workers have never been better, and she is more relaxed at work and at home.

Discover Your Own Values

Considerable personal power is available to each of us when we discover our values, adjust them to make sure they are balanced and healthy, and create ways to honor them through action. Of interest to me is the fact that we *already* operate from our values base. Whether we

intend to or not is immaterial. Our values drive our decisions, our behaviors, and filter our view of the world around us.

Seeking clarity on our personal values allows us the opportunity to make the best choices for ourselves. Remaining ignorant of them leaves our best choices to be made by others.

For leaders, understanding their personal values gives them a great range of choices to make in shaping their organizational culture, whether that organization is a family, scout troop, sports team, or major corporation. Our values follow us more closely than our shadow. Our values are our very *core*.

Leaders who exercise their personal values set a clear example. They are aware of why they make the decisions they make. They have an internal guiding beacon when they have to make tough choices. They understand the range of *acceptable* choices available to them. They judge others less harshly, while inspiring higher performance. They tend to find great satisfaction in their work. They tend to form relationships of trust read-

ily. They live healthier lives. They are comfortable with themselves. They treat themselves (and others) with TLC — tender loving care. They suffer less stress.

And who among us couldn't benefit from a little less stress?

Editor's Note: The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at **Robert.Rue@hanscom. af.mil.**

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