

Values, Beliefs, and Motivation

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Wherever we see leaders at work, leadership and values are interwoven. Values underlie the leader's vision. Values are the primary moving force in motivation. Values determine how we brand our organization. Values determine the standards we use to evaluate our own performance, the performance of others, and the performance of the organization.

Yet, values are commonly treated as somewhat secondary to leadership. How much space is devoted to values in the typical book on leadership? How many presentations on leadership seriously delve into values?

I'm not suggesting that these books or presentations ignore values altogether. They are likely to speak at length about certain individual values such as integrity, trust, respect, humility, etc. But they seldom explore the concept of values per se. They rarely look at what constitutes a value, how values interrelate with beliefs, principles, and attitudes, and why values have a compelling impact on how we think, act, and behave.

Today we take a deep dive into the topic of values. Since so much of a leader's work revolves around values, having a greater grasp of what they are and how best to capitalize on them is a sure way to Upsize Your Leadership.

A few weeks ago, we devoted an entire episode to one of the most important values in leadership: integrity. The essence of integrity, we noted, is embracing the right standards and then holding ourselves accountable to these standards.

Such standards take a variety of forms. Some standards are values. Others are beliefs. And still others are principles.

These three – values, beliefs, and principles – work hand-in-glove as a cohesive unit, somewhat like atoms in a molecule which are bound together by a valence structure. For that reason, it's instructive to think of values, beliefs, and principles as forming a molecule – what I will refer to as the VBP molecule.

At the heart of any VBP molecule is a value. Its influence radiates through the entire molecule. Clustered around the value, and arising from it, are beliefs which we hold about the value itself.

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We have beliefs about why this particular value is important to us. We have other beliefs about its relative importance compared to other values. And we have beliefs about what it means to live in keeping with this value.

Then, stemming from each belief, are one or more principles which structure how we translate these beliefs into action. The VBP molecule thus consists of a single value at the center, surrounded by a cluster of beliefs, with a cluster of principles then surrounding each as belief.

It's not uncommon to hear the words "values," "beliefs", and "principles" used rather interchangeably. Some people call honesty a value, others call it a principle. Another person might cast it in the form a belief by saying, "I believe in honesty."

So what is honesty? A value? An object of belief? Or a principle?

As we use the terms in the VBP molecule, honesty is a value. We then have certain beliefs about this value. Beliefs such as, "Without honesty, trust breaks down." Or "Honesty is more important than profit."

Then, from these beliefs we derive certain principles which guide our life, principles such as, "I should always tell the truth" or "If a cashier returns too much change to me, I should give back the excess amount."

Let's dig deeper into these distinctions by examining the meaning of values, beliefs, and principles in the VBP molecule. We start with values, because values are ultimately the source of our motivation. Or to put it in practical terms, we are not motivated to do things which have no value to us.

In my judgment the most helpful way to think of values is to borrow from the field of neuro-linguistic programming (or NLP). NLP has a distinct way of defining values. It describes them as "things which we move toward or away from."

This description recognizes that what ultimately motivates us to take action (apart from reflex reactions) is one of two things. We act either to acquire or attain something which we desire (that is, something which we move toward) or to distance ourselves from something which we want to avoid, something which we move away from. In either case, NLP considers the thing which triggers this movement as a value. It thus speaks of "toward motivations" and "away-from motivations."

Now, looking at values this way is something of a departure from the way we talk about values in day-to-day conversation. If someone asks us to identify our values, we are likely to include only things which we strive for, e.g., justice, harmony, peace. These are all things which we move toward.

But when we expand our definition of values to include things which we move away from, our list of values now includes such things as failure, poverty, or guilt.

The reason I prefer this broader view of values is that it gives us a more comprehensive picture of motivation. As leaders, we quickly learn that people are motivated both by what they want (such as "promotions") and what they don't want ("blame," for example).

Values are such powerful motivators that they can override reflex responses and impulses. The strongest impulse in our make-up, originating in the deepest structures of the brain, is the instinct to survive, to preserve our existence.

Yet people routinely set this instinct aside by risking life itself to rescue someone in danger. If asked what motivated them to hazard such risk, they will answer either in terms of a value or in terms of a principle which points to a value. "I did it out of a sense of duty," a first responder might say. Someone else might explain, "I did it because it's what any neighbor should do for a neighbor."

From the first responder's reply, we learn that he or she has a hierarchy of values in which duty is more important than self-preservation. From the second person's response, we see a view of the world in which loving one's neighbor ranks higher than personal survival.

So, our first distinction is that values are the ultimate source of our motivation. Second, values can always be stated as a single word ("love," "achievement," "unpleasantness") or a short phrase ("customer service," "financial security"). Notice that these are noun constructions exclusively. They have no verbal components. No qualifying adverbs. No quantifying adjectives. Values are static. And they are stated as abstract nouns in terms like achievement, service, or security.

We occasionally narrow the scope of this abstraction by adding a brief descriptor to the value. This gives us values such as love of country. Pride of ownership. Customer service. Financial security. These "scope-limiters" answer the question, "Within what realm do we hold this value?"

Thus, when we list customer service among our values, "customer" answers the question, "Service in what realm?" Similarly, if we name financial security as a value, "financial" answers the question, "Security in what realm?"

Apart from these scope-limiters, values stand unadorned as pure abstract nouns, connoting things we move toward or away from. Once we begin quantifying or qualifying a value further, we move from values to principles, principles which are derived from our beliefs about the value.

The purpose of principles is to give us guidelines for implementing our values. We feel answerable to principles, because they describe what we see as appropriate and inappropriate ways to put our values into practice.

For instance, if customer service is a core value for us, one of our supporting principles might be "timely response to customer complaints." Another principle might be "minimizing the time in line at checkout stations" or "maintaining industry-leading return policies."

As these examples illustrate, we can express principles in brief phrases. Because principles, provide guidelines, they require language which is more specific and quantifiable than a mere abstraction. Whereas values are stated as abstract nouns, the wording of principles may include verbal elements (such as *minimizing* the time in line at checkout stations") or adverbs and adjectives (such as *timely* response to customer complaints").

The connecting thread between our values and our principles are beliefs about specific values. Beliefs can be thought of as the rationale for our values. They explain why we hold to a given value, why we rank it where we do in our hierarchy of values, and how we think the value should

be reflected in our attitudes and behavior. One team of authors calls our collective beliefs “the ‘executive summary’ of our world view.”

Because beliefs about a value encompass our sense of how to implement this value, beliefs give rise to our principles. Just as they are a rationale for our values, beliefs also provide the rationale for the set of principles we espouse.

Because they offer rationales, beliefs cannot be expressed as a single term (like values can) or a phrase (as is the case with principles). Beliefs can only be expressed in complete sentences.

To illustrate, one of your corporate values might be employee retention. Notice that we can state the value as a simple abstract term. If employee retention ranks high on your list of values, you have certain beliefs about why it should rank at that level. Conversely, if it somewhat low on your list of values, you have beliefs about why other values are more important than employee retention.

You also have beliefs about how employee retention is best achieved. One belief might be, “Our retention rate is likely to be stronger if we demonstrate genuine interest in our employees’ well-being.” Another might be, “Some things are more important than salary in retaining good employees.” Notice again that these beliefs are expressed as complete sentences.

Next, flowing from these beliefs, certain principles would support the governing value. These principles might include treating employees respectfully, offering employees exceptional personal development opportunities, or providing on-site childcare for employees with small children.

Interestingly, we also have a rationale for the principles which we uphold, and this rationale is also a set of beliefs. One such belief might be, “On-site childcare is important, because employees are more productive when they know that their children are being well cared for.”

Because they lay out the rationale for our values and principles, beliefs are cognitive in nature. They build on logic, data, information, and reflection on experience.

Values, by contrast, are affective in nature. They reside in that part of our being where we house our feelings and where we form our likes and our dislikes. The VBP molecule therefore encompasses both the affective and cognitive portions of our inner being. In addition, the VBP molecule, properly developed, aligns our affective and cognitive outlooks to provide a roadmap for living life.

Now, let’s relate what we have said about the VBP molecule to the leader’s key responsibility to motivate and inspire. Since values are at the heart of motivation, effective leaders must know their people well enough to have a clear sense of which values resonate most deeply with their people. But in and of itself, merely understanding people’s values is not sufficient to fully grasp why they act the way they do. Their actions flow from the beliefs which they have about these values and the principles which they derive from these beliefs.

Most conflict in political, corporate, and family circles is not a conflict over values. It’s a conflict over how particular values should be implemented. It’s either a conflict over beliefs or about principles or both.

To cite a political example, two people may both put a premium on the value of world peace. One of the two believes that peace is best achieved by having sufficient military might to thwart aggressors and tyrants. Another believes that peace is best achieved through diplomacy and the avoidance of conflict.

The political divide between these two is not about their core value. Both cherish the idea of world peace. Where they are divided is in what they believe about achieving world peace. Their contrasting beliefs give rise to altogether opposing principles. One or them argues for budgetary policies which would give priority to military expenditures. The other organizes demonstrations against military spending. For both, their political activism is based on principle.

The interplay between values, beliefs, and principles has notable implications for leaders. The motivational responsibility of leaders is to create emotional and psychological connection between the values of their people and the result which the leader wants to achieve. In building this connection, leaders must take into account not only their people's values, but also what their people believe about these values and the principles which they derive from their beliefs.

Only when they are fully engaged with their people will leaders be able to uncover these aspects of their people's outlook. Even at that, the leader's knowledge will usually be far from complete when it comes to what people believe about values which they share in common with the leader. And leaders are likely to be even less informed about the principles which their people have derived from these beliefs.

When promoting values, therefore, leaders must mount a larger messaging campaign than merely engaging people around these values. Their message must also address beliefs and principles surrounding the values under discussion. Leaders must make clear what they want their people to believe about the subject values and the most important principles to be drawn from these beliefs. In other words, leaders must not settle for selling values. They must be equally engaged in selling a mindset which surrounds those values.

One of the most common mistakes among managers – especially less experienced ones – is assuming that their people are motivated by the same things which motivate the manager. Most managers discover rather quickly that there is tremendous diversity in what motivates people.

Even experienced managers, however, can make a related mistake. They can believe that because they and their workers share a common set of values, they and their workers are on the same page. It baffles them, therefore, when that proves not to be the case. What they have overlooked is the role that beliefs and principles play in how people implement values. In short, it's just as important for leaders to promote shared beliefs about core values as it is to promote the values themselves.

In our next episode we will revisit today's theme, but make our way into some very practical implications of toward and away-from motivations. For now, let me suggest an enriching exercise for you. In all likelihood, you've never mapped out a VBP molecule for your most cherished values. I'm somewhat confident in that statement, because after coaching upwards of 700 executives, leaders, and managers I've never had a client who had previously done so.

Take some time, therefore, to map at least one of the values which you hold most dear. Start with the value itself. Write it down at the top of a sheet of paper. In the left column begin listing the most important beliefs you have about that value, leaving considerable space vertically

between the individual beliefs. You may have to flow the list over into a second or third page to allow enough room.

Next, in the right column, alongside each belief, start compiling the principles which you live by as a result of that belief. This part of the exercise may require considerable reflection, because most of us have rarely tied our principles to beliefs which we have about our values.

By completing this exercise, you will understand the VBP molecule more fully. If you pursue this exercise on several values, you will derive two benefits. First, you will have far greater clarity on your value system (which includes your values, beliefs, and principles). And second, you will begin instinctively mapping the VBP molecule which you observe in other people.

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