

How to Identify and Articulate Your Values

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Your values are powerful controllers of your behavior. Most of the time, however, they operate in the background, affecting your choices in ways you do not even comprehend. You make your decisions based on what seems important to you, with a desire to bring about some specific beneficial effect.

As I work with leaders, I find that many have never explicitly identified and articulated their values.

Is it important that you be able to express your values to others? Think about when you were dating. As you were courting your sweetie, didn't you share your likes and dislikes, and your dreams for the future? You were testing to see if your values were compatible! You were determining your willingness to invest the rest of your life with a person whose values could easily conflict with yours!

Your values are just as important today. Like all your other underlying beliefs, they are there influencing every choice you make. Your values are such a significant part of your leadership decision-making that I strongly recommend you allocate the time and energy to consciously identify them.

The activity may seem a little strange at first. Your values are so much a part of you that you may find it difficult to explicitly articulate them. However, if you'll just start, you'll work through the awkwardness, and you'll find that your ability to express your previously underlying thoughts will develop quickly.

A simple way to generate an initial draft of your values is to fill in the blank at the end of two different sentences. The first one is this: "What's important to me in life is _____." The next one is even simpler: "I value _____." If you're like most people, you'll come up with a dozen thoughts right away.

If you want to have some fun doing this (and rekindle that romance that I mentioned above) take your sweetie out to dinner one evening. Take a piece of paper and a pen with you and use your collective awareness of who you are and what drives you. (If you don't currently have a romantic interest, some time spent with a very good friend who knows you well will work just fine!)

Rather than generating a set of personal values, you may prefer to create a set of family values. That way your close confidant doesn't have to be constrained to imagining how you function in your workplace. Later, you can modify what you generate (if it needs it) for application in your leadership role.

You'll probably be pleased with your first draft, yet you may feel that the list can't possibly be complete after only one thought session. You're right! Allow the list to lie idle for several days. New ideas will certainly come to you. As they do, add them to the list (even if you are adding thoughts years later).

To finish this initial effort, I suggest one more look at your list. Go to a close colleague who knows you well and explain what you are doing. Invite him or her to make additions or modifications to your list.

Now spend some time wordsmithing and prioritizing. Find a convenient cutoff where you believe you've described your most important values. You need not worry that you'll exclude something important; you should add to or modify your values list periodically as you evaluate your goals and vision for the future.

Share your values with your leadership team members and ask them to privately provide their comments on where they see outages and overstatements. As you have conversations with each member of your leadership team, suggest to them that they articulate their values, too.

Your purpose for replicating your discovery process throughout your organization is twofold. First, you'd like for everyone to experience the same kind of introspection, so that they get to know themselves better. Second, when you understand what's important to each individual, you can connect with their needs and inspire them, linking their interests with activities needed by the organization.

This may initially appear to be a superficial, insignificant activity. It never fails, however, that leaders tell me how enlightening this process has been for them. It's just another example of raising a leader's awareness, which is always a powerful contribution to further growth and enhanced effectiveness!