

Why Values are Valuable

Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, April 12, 2010

Animals have instincts, inborn tendencies to behave in predictable ways. The instincts preserve the life of the individual (try approaching a wild animal and see how close you can get) or preserve the species (such as mating rituals, nesting methods, migration paths, etc.).

Humans may have instincts, too, but they are usually overridden by “values,” the social standards or preferences that are held by an individual or group. Values are the underlying assumptions about what is important to us in life. They provide the boundaries for what we will and won’t do.

All of us have values. We tend to take them for granted. Few of us have allocated the time or done the work necessary to examine our values to the extent that we are able to express them clearly to another person. Values are silent determiners of our behavior, like a computer program running quietly in the background of our minds. Values influence every decision we make, but we are usually unaware of their presence and their effects on our choices.

Usually a person is looking to understand something of your values when asking, “Why did you do that?” He or she may not be thinking “values,” but your response will likely provide a hint as to what was important to you in that particular situation.

Not everybody’s values are the same, of course. Each person has his or her own set of values. Like fingerprints, you won’t find two humans with identical values--not even identical twins!

Where do your values come from? That’s something you might evaluate if you take the time to examine your values. Many of your preferences are on automatic pilot from childhood, adopted unconsciously from your parents or other authority figures.

Some were acquired or modified in your teens and early adult years, based on your unique experiences and the influence of friends. As an adult, your values usually change only in response to some significant emotional event, usually a new experience or some previously unknown information that generates in you a major paradigm shift.

Every group of individuals settles into an acceptable range of behaviors, whether they’ve articulated their values or not. Usually, continued acceptance in the group requires conformity to these values. New people joining the group quickly learn the limits of expected behaviors.

I’ve had the privilege of helping leaders and employees of companies articulate the organizational values they’ve been living and more importantly, desire to live by in the future. These values are listed in company documents and are used to orient new employees. Company leaders consciously refer to these stated values when making and communicating major decisions.

What are the benefits of having clearly evaluated and consciously chosen your values? You don’t have to agonize over every decision you make; most choices are either within the bounds of acceptability or are not even worth considering by you. You are able to explain why you choose certain behaviors and avoid others.

You represent your perspectives clearly and confidently. You consciously apply your standards when you have hard decisions or must make close calls. You are reasonably consistent and reliable in your behaviors. You easily recognize differences with individuals who have adopted other values.

People respect you when there is consistency between what you say and what you do. People trust you when they support your values and your behaviors are consistent with them. Hypocrisy is the disparaging term that describes variance between what you claim to advocate and how you actually behave. We all violate our own values at times, so we can all admit to being hypocrites!

Success in life is often based on the relationships you build with family members, friends, colleagues, and customers. For relationships to be healthy, compatibility needs to exist among the values of the individuals. If discrepancies cannot be worked out, the relationship may deteriorate. Conflicts in values are the most difficult types of disagreements to reconcile.

Consider setting aside some time to contemplate your values. Write them down and share them with others who are important to you. Your values influence everything that you do--something that important deserves your focused attention. A couple of hours of conscious reflection may add significantly to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the rest of your life.

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