

Your Values Drive Your Behaviors

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Over the past weeks, I've written about the three categories of choices we make in life. Today's column is an overview for anyone who missed those articles.

We all have values. Few of us, however, can easily articulate what's important in our lives. As I work with leaders, I encourage them to take time to write down their values, opening themselves to the possibility that it's not yet a complete list.

I follow my own advice. Fifteen years ago, my wife and I spent a lovely afternoon thinking deeply about what gives our life meaning. We've printed our values and posted them on the wall. Lately, though, I've been adding and clarifying by attaching yellow "sticky notes." Fortunately, my wife is patient with her weird husband!

You may be curious about the source of your values. Many were inherited from your parents or other authority figures in your young life. You never realized you were adopting as values what you observed and what your parents believed. It's an unconscious process on both sides. They probably didn't realize either that they were passing along their values!

Some of your values were developed as an older child and teenager, as you worked to fit into your group of friends. This also wasn't conscious, except that you were sensitive to what lost and gained the approval of your buddies.

As an adult, you have the privilege of intentionally modifying or reinforcing some of your values. You can "stand apart" from your daily activities, analyzing why you do what you do. Sometimes the honest answer is, "I don't know why I do that." There's hope for improving those behaviors!

Many times, however, the answer is, "That's what I learned years ago, and I don't know any other way!" These patterns are usually more difficult to change.

Because you have so much power to influence others, I encourage you to examine your choice-making processes. If you are not conscious about your values, you risk giving up some of your power by making ineffective choices.

Making meaning. Do you jump to conclusions quickly? Are you judgmental? Or do you comfortably ask "What else could this mean?" That's a great question to adopt. Ask it of yourself and others. We all make meaning of whatever situation we face, yet we often do it unconsciously and quickly. The meaning we make, however, is often wrong. If we make a wrong choice at this point, the other two types of choices are not likely to overcome our error.

Focusing time and energy. I work with busy people. There is more on the "to do" list than there is time for accomplishing. Although we focus on clarifying the difference between "important" and "urgent," the urgent demands are persistently vying for attention. Knowing what you value will help extensively with choosing from among the competing alternatives.

Daily doing. Our lives are filled with behaviors. Every behavior is preceded by a choice. Every choice is driven by your values. Even if you are conscious about what action is likely to provide the outcome you desire, the definition of your desired outcome is driven by your values. Your values are ubiquitous.

Yet your values do not determine outcomes. You can choose your behaviors, but the outcomes of your behaviors are driven by many things beyond your control. When you get right down to it, the only thing you control in life are your personal choices. And even those are questionable if you've not been conscious about clarifying and anchoring your values!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders make meaning of their situations, focus their energies, and choose effectively. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Contact him at dhooper2@juno.com.