

# **'Behavioralizing' Your Organizational Values--Part 1**

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Values are the bedrock of any high performing team. People need to understand and agree on what really matters and why.

Perhaps you are knowingly nodding your head in agreement. However, the purpose of this article is to encourage you to take a fresh look at the concept of "values" in your life and in your organization.

Every person has values. Values are the underlying beliefs that influence every decision you make. Yet few people can articulate their personal values. Values operate in the realm of the subconscious. Though we realize they are present and functioning, values are simply hard to label.

Why is putting your finger on what you believe so difficult? I think it's because your values have been with you since shortly after your birth. You gained them unknowingly, while you were still very young. Your parents or other authority figures in your life were teaching them to you without realizing it.

With perhaps a few exceptions, your parents never articulated a name or a description of the values they instilled in you. They just taught you that certain thoughts and behaviors were good, right, or nice. Additionally, they taught you that it was bad, wrong, or inappropriate to think or do certain other things.

Now, let's put together a collection of people, all of whom have unnamed values. They are the team over which you have some authority. Isn't it unlikely that they all have identical values?

Yet, over time, they've probably found a way to work together. With some collective give and take, team members have settled into a way of doing things that seems tolerable to most. Essentially, the group has accommodated the differences. Your team has tacitly adopted its own set of values.

Unless you and your team have articulated your organizational values, how does a new team member learn what's acceptable behavior and what's not?

New team members start doing what they believe is appropriate. If the actions and attitudes are consistent with the existing organizational values, they get along well with others on your team.

If the actions and attitudes are inconsistent with the existing organizational values, others show discomfort in some way. The expression of discomfort may be intentional and overt, or it may be subtle.

If the new person wants to fit in AND detects the discomfort of the others in the group, he or she may ask a few questions for clarification or simply adapt. If, however, the new person isn't concerned with fitting in OR fails to notice the overt or subtle feedback, there could be trouble. The discomfort of one or more team members is likely to escalate into some kind of conflict.

This informal and sometimes awkward learning process diverts valuable time and energy from achieving the mission of the organization. Some leaders decide to articulate the team's values.

A problem arises, however, in trying to enumerate the values that exist in an organization. As soon as you start, people have a tendency to name values they think SHOULD exist. These are often different from what has actually existed in the past. Which should the team express?

I've articulated values both ways, and either approach generates subsequent problems. If you describe what currently exists and you never intentionally seek improvement, the culture will not move in the direction of genuine excellence. If you describe what you want to be true of the culture, newcomers will discover quickly the hypocritical gap between what is publicized and what truly exists.

Either approach will work. Let your team members decide. The important step is then to use existing team members to rigorously train new people in how to genuinely "live" your cultural values. Engaging existing and new team members is the key, and I'll describe how to do that in Part 2 in two weeks.