



Peeler Associates

Helping Leaders Grow

## Clarifying Our Values

Every day we are faced with decisions. Often, they are pivotal decisions on which the course of our foreseeable future may rest. Should I take that job? Buy this business? Work with that client? Accept this offer?

These are important decisions. Yet, as difficult as these decisions are, the answers become clearer if we first understand our own personal and professional values.

Our values are central to our being. They are who we are and, whether we know it or not, they are the yardstick with which we measure our satisfaction with all things. Whenever we are at a crossroads, or faced with making a major decision, it is helpful to reflect on our values and get clear about them.

### What are Values?

Values are those things that we care about. They might be material or intrinsic. Values include objects, states of being, ideas, and behaviors. A value can be almost anything, and that can make values hard for us to wrap our arms around.

The list of values that one might claim is almost infinite. Some of the things that often show up are honesty, success, equality, recognition, service, learning, material things, money, perfection, discipline, family, and more.

### When should we identify our values?

Any life change or decision point is a good time to do values identification. I often ask clients who are contemplating a career change to reassess their current values so that when an opportunity presents itself, they can readily identify its compatibility with what they hold dear.

Another perfect time to reassess your values is when you sense discord – you know, that anxious feeling that something isn't right – and you want to find the source. That sense of discord is a strong indicator that there's a misalignment between our lives and our values. This discord can be a signal that our relationship with our values is changing.

### Our changing relationship with our values

Initially, the idea that our relationship with our values could change caused me much angst. I always taught in my leadership workshops that values were pretty static, fixed from young adulthood and unchanging, save for minor shifts as we mature.

I still believe this, but now I see that our values come to prominence or recede according to our current circumstances. Years ago, family wasn't on my list of values. My father was my only close relative, I loved him, we got along, and I visited him often, but he was independent. My family value wasn't a rub

so, as a value, it wasn't on my radar. But after my dad became seriously ill and I became his caregiver, "family" showed up prominently on my list of values. The family value must surely have been there all along. It just took an event to bring it to conscious prominence.

## My personal experience

While my father was ill, and life was pretty chaotic, I was also completing my research project for my Master's Degree. As part of my project, I did a values identification exercise in the context of what was going on in my life right then and surprised myself by completing it in about 40 minutes.

It was so easy. It just flowed. My final list was:

1. Reliability
2. Family
3. Business Success
4. Balance
5. Learning

It wasn't until later that I realized that I'd left a whole lot of values – ones that I would normally have claimed – off of the list. I was not willing to lie, cheat, or steal to protect the values that I listed. My honesty value was still there. It just didn't make the top-five list. I finally figured out that it didn't make the list because it wasn't a rub. It wasn't causing friction in my life. Integrity and compassion, for instance, were not causing friction either, so they didn't make the list.

Since then, I've instructed clients not to drive themselves crazy trying to identify each thing that they fundamentally believe in. Instead, I tell them to look for their core values in "the rub" and assume that, since the list is a reflection of where they are right now, everything won't make the list.

## Identifying values and making them real

I recommend starting by asking a few questions:

1. What feels right in my life right now?
2. What feels out of alignment?
3. What five words would others use to describe me?
4. What words would I LIKE to be able to use to describe myself?
5. What do I want most fervently?

Your answers may be single words like honesty, family, recognition, compassion, but most often the answers will take the form of a statement, e.g. "I want to be more..." It is helpful to start with these statements as you will need to define what the value means to you anyway. Then you will need to personalize the value, that is, give examples of what it means to live in accordance with this value.

Ultimately, as you refine your list of no more than six values, you will note three things:

1. The name of the value, to identify it
2. A definition, to clarify it
3. Examples, to personalize it

Here's an example using the value of "*Connectedness*." Remember, values are very personal, so your definition and examples might look very different if *Connectedness* is your selected value.

*Connectedness*: Actively seeking out opportunities to be with and to collaborate with others.

- Cultivate potentially enjoyable and mutually beneficial friendships by letting other people know of my interest and by following up quickly.
- Setting up a mastermind group to share business wisdom and expertise.
- Making "dates" in advance with friends to ensure regular contact.

## In Conclusion

After we have done this exercise and identified our top values, the list will not be exhaustive. It won't contain every single principal that we believe in or thing that we want. If we have done the exercise relative to our present moment, it will likely be a list of those things that we hold dear, but which may be endangered – those areas where we find the "rub."