

Has your organization articulated its shared values?

1. What are values?

A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to another.

Individuals have values. These values guide our actions and judgments. Our values are the standards that influence us as we make choices among alternative courses of action. Value systems are relatively permanent frameworks that shape and influence our behavior.

2. Groups have values too.

The key is, the group must articulate its values. These shared values then provide the framework that guides the actions and judgments of the group (or organization).

Groups (and organizations) operate best through consensus and unity of purpose and action. This means that the individual's values must match those of the collective entity. This “values match” is essential to the health and effectiveness of the group and is essential to the well being of the individual participant.

Values “define the enduring character of the organization.” (James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, “Building Your Company’s Vision, *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1996.) These values are nurtured for their own sake, as the foundation of the organization. As Ralph S. Larsen, CEO of Johnson & Johnson says, “We have [values] because they define for us what we stand for, and we would hold them even if they became a competitive disadvantage in certain situations.” (Ibid.)

Articulating values is one of the most important things that a group (or organization) does. Too often, groups go forth, stating that “everyone knows what we value.” All too often, conflict emerges – and it’s a values conflict because that which was implied was not made explicit.

When groups get together to clarify values, each individual must participate actively in the dialogue, with candor and honest feeling. Each individual must decide if s/he can support each value. To produce consensus, ask, “Is there anyone in the group who cannot live with this?”

Value conflicts are inevitable in the process of decision-making. Sometimes, membership in a group or organization places constraints on individual values. When an individual is invited to join a group or organization, the group or organization must state its values up front. By joining, the individual agrees to subscribe to and support the group’s / organization’s values. Sometimes groups or organizations face conflicts between their own clearly-articulated values.

3. Seven steps that define a value. [Louis Rath, following John Dewey. Values and Teaching.]

- *Prized and cherished*. A value is something you prize and cherish.
- *Publicly affirmed*. You must be willing, when appropriate, to publicly affirm what you value.
- *Available alternatives*. There must be the possibility of freedom, i.e., available alternatives.
- *Chosen intelligently*. A true value is chosen intelligently, after consideration of the consequences.
- *Chosen freely*. A true value is chosen freely, after considering the consequences.
- *Action*. A true value involves acting on your belief. The final test of a value is action.
- *Repeated action*. A true value involves acting on it repeatedly and with a consistent pattern.