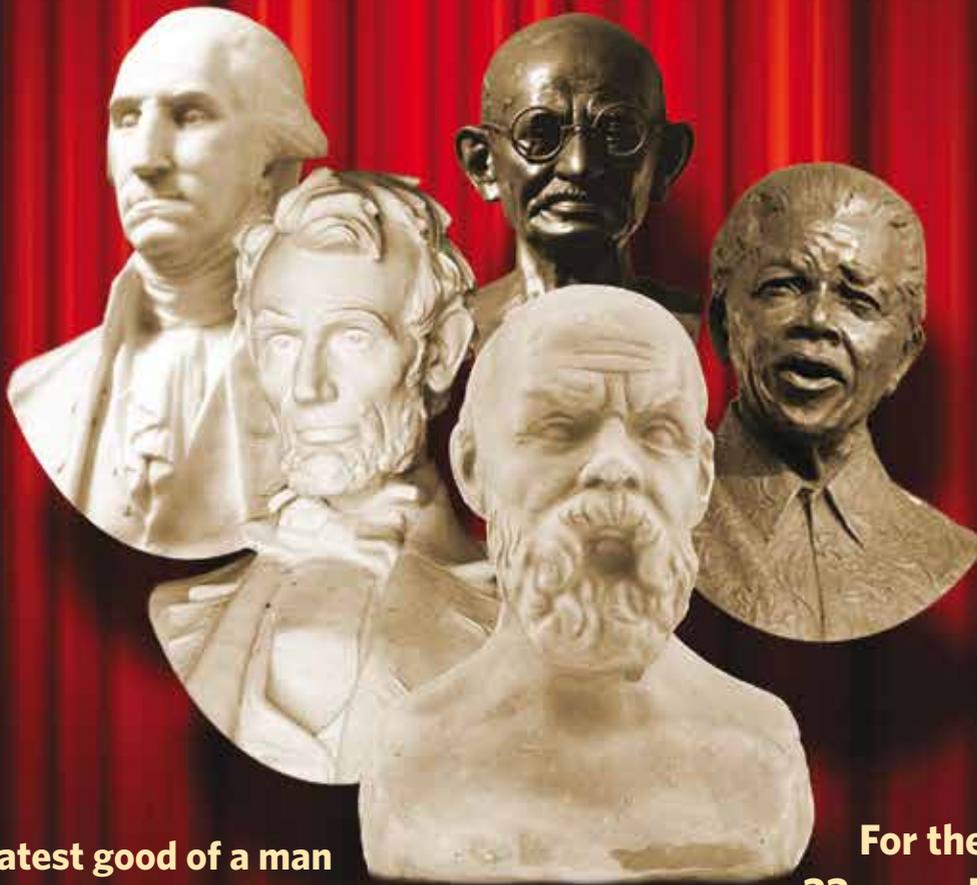


# Values Take Center Stage

*Stan Emelander*



**The greatest good of a man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living.**

**—Socrates, 399 BC**

**For the past 33 years I have looked in the mirror and asked myself, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?"**

**—Steve Jobs, 2005 AD**

**V**alues exert a powerful influence on our behavior, whether or not we deliberately choose which are most important. I think this is primarily what Socrates meant. Consider how you start your day. Let's say you are someone, like me, who sometimes has trouble getting going in the morning. As you hustle through your morning routine, you might feel pressed for time, a little pressured and hassled. What are your concerns when

**Emelander** is a product manager in the Army's Individual Weapons program. He holds a doctoral degree in organization and management and is a graduate of the Excellence in Government Fellowship sponsored by the Partnership for Public Service. He is Level II certified in Program Management, and Level I in Systems Engineering.

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you feel this way? Are you in control? Where are your values? Do you regularly start your day in a positive or negative frame of mind? Think about the many other circumstances where your mood, outlook, and effectiveness are influenced by values that may be unconscious and out of control.

In my experience, values are universally recognized as important, but also often weakly understood and acted upon. As a starting point, it helps to define the term clearly. Values can be defined as deeply held beliefs and needs that guide our decisions and behavior, the principles and standards that give meaning to life. Core values are those we will not violate, even when the stakes are high. The concept of values also extends to our personal likes, dislikes, and preferences. For instance, although a desire to exercise every day may seem unrelated to deeply held moral beliefs, it cannot be rejected as a value. If being fit contributes to your quality of life, and you deeply enjoy the activity, exercise also has a place among your values. Values, then, both constrain our behavior and compel us to take action.

## Why Values Matter

Developing and acting on strong values is important for professional success and personal meaning. It's unsurprising that studies show people who recognize and regularly act on their core values experience greater fulfillment, satisfaction, and success. Personal values can become meaningful goals, and working to achieve substantial goals is the prime ingredient of a purposeful life. Studies show that those who prize intrinsic values, such as meaningful work, experience greater happiness than those who esteem extrinsic values like wealth, even when the differences in wealth are large. The integration of values with work is one way to answer this question: "Do you work to do something, or for something to do?"

The case for strong organizational values is just as convincing. Organizational values can point the way to behaviors that power the firm's strategy, such as creative risk-taking or putting customer's needs first. Trust, to take one value, has been identified as the key distinguishing feature of top-performing business. Research also supports the link between committed workers and business success, making the firm's support for workers' value fulfillment a top priority. The ideal situation exists when there is congruence between individual and organizational values, often embodied by the firm's leaders. Values also play an essential role in leadership development.

In the field of leadership studies, values are strongly associated with the greatest role models. True leadership can be thought of as the art of persuading others to act when they can choose not to, and the strongest call to action often originates from a leader's values. Aspiring leaders everywhere identify role models, including Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, George Washington, and others whose strongly held and effectively communicated values contributed to their profound impact. While there are many different leadership styles and behaviors, nothing is stronger than matching values in persuading followers to act. However, despite their appeal and importance, multiple challenges inhibit developing and acting upon values.

## Barriers to Value Formation

If strong personal values are such a potent force for success and fulfillment, what blocks their development and implementation? We can identify several factors. Deciding upon a core set of values might be a daunting task, requiring considerable introspection, and finding time for self-reflection can be a challenge in our era of expanding job hours and constant information input. Analysis of one's own behaviors can be uncomfortable, especially if when we are asking unfamiliar questions. Also, the sheer number of values, and their inter-relatedness, complicates the task. Trust, for example, can be thought of as consisting of reliability and competence, which are themselves values. So what does it really mean to hold trustworthiness as a value?

Additional inhibitors exist in teams and other organizations. At work, values may be considered a personal matter, something we are reluctant to discuss. When is the last time you asked your supervisors about their values? When have you explained your values to your constituents? Barriers to communication, including clarity, frequency, and information overload can hinder the distribution of leaders' intent concerning values. An effort to instill a new set of values can entail a change to organizational culture that may be resisted. Factors such as fear, a perceived threat to power and prestige, and fatigue from past change efforts must be overcome for new cultural values to take hold. There also is the potential problem of over-exposure leading to cynicism and a "flavor of the moment" attitude on the part of workers. Another challenge is conflict between organizational and individual values, leading to confusion. Employees are quick to detect discrepancies between the organization's stated values and conflicting behaviors by leaders at any level.

## Discovering Values

You may have to dive deep to retrieve your values. I was initially overwhelmed trying to sift through lists of possible values, but started making progress when I followed some of the guidelines available on the Internet and elsewhere. These included imagining one's own memorial service and what one would most want to be remembered for, and thinking about what made peak experiences so significant: First identify some peak experiences, then recall your feelings at that time and since. Another method is self-observation, reflecting on your regular behavior. Your repeated activities, encompassing all areas of life, signal where your values lie. Whatever the method used, record the values you identify and make a date with yourself to revisit them. I find that my most important values change, becoming clearer, when I consider them again.

Collective values may be developed for teams, departments, and the whole enterprise. Along with mission and vision state-

well do they match your ideal list of values? This exercise can be done for the various spheres of life, including your work life.

Another method focuses on enacting your values, thinking of ways you can put your values into action. Research the definition of each of your values and write an expanded personal definition, concentrating on how it could be enacted and what specific behaviors make it come to life. Select a value to enact and focus upon each day; if your day includes meetings or other trying activities, attempt to be specifically conscious of your value intent throughout the event. Yet another technique is to identify an icon that represents your values. It might be a person, an animal (lion, eagle), or something drawn from nature (ocean, mountain). Periodically touch bases with your icon, especially when you feel pressured.

In addition to their personal values, managers and leaders must consider how to empower organizational values. The

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ments, a statement of core values is a common method managers use to communicate organizational purpose and influence culture. Group values have multiple sources, including the parent enterprise, the top management team, and customers, but the most potent source of an organization's values is usually its employees. Effective leaders are in touch with followers and pay attention to their dreams and aspirations, fostering organizational values that share an organic relationship with employee values. These have the strongest resonance and are more likely to be adopted as part of the organization's culture. Transformational leadership, including effective communication of an empowering vision, especially seeks to address gaps or dissonance between individual and collective values.

## Empowering Values

A first step to empowering your values is to analyze how well you are now enacting them. Ideally, your behavior should match your values, with the most time and intensity devoted to those most important. One straightforward means to weigh this alignment is to draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On the left side list your regular activities, on the right side your reasons for these behaviors. If one activity-reason pair (like servicing your car) is in support of another (like getting to work) cross it out, so only root activities and reasons remain. Look at the reasons for the remaining behaviors. How

organization's values (conscious or unconscious) are at the heart of what it does to survive (i.e., its strategy), and enacting those values also is at the heart of a leader's role. Two aspects of leadership enable this effort: effective communications and role modeling. Discussion of values is important and does not have to be an extraordinary event. It is reasonable, for instance, to emphasize trust, fairness, or honesty, as themes at the start of a meeting, or to explore what values set your team, department, or organization apart from others. This method, asking "what makes us special," offers leadership opportunities for employees at all levels and lowers the barrier to value infusion.

Role modeling is arguably the most powerful method at the leader's disposal to affect follower behavior and beliefs. Values such as customer service come alive when workers observe leaders helping customers themselves. For organizations, as for individuals, the greatest challenge lies in enacting values. To avoid the "hollow values" syndrome, managers must follow through and to see that behavior and rewards match the organization's values. Remember, "What gets measured gets done." When values are consistent between leaders, followers, and customers, everyone benefits from their fulfillment. 

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The author can be contacted at [stanley.j.emelander.civ@mail.mil](mailto:stanley.j.emelander.civ@mail.mil).