

# How do values influence group development & organisational culture?

BY MICHAEL HENDERSON & DOUGAL THOMPSON

## **Purpose of the article**

The purpose of this article is to answer a few of the frequently asked questions (FAQs) that are put to us about values and their application for group and organisational development.

## **Some FAQs about values**

What are values? How do values work? Can values be used to explore and understand group dynamics and behaviour? Can values really be measured? How can people use values to help them achieve their desired objectives? How can you measure team values?

### **1. What are values and where do they come from?**

Values are concepts. They are 'ideas' of what gives a sense of meaning or worth. We consider values to be the preferences and priorities that create meaning and motivation in one's life.

Values are often confused with such things as morals, ethics, emotions, and principles. (For more on this see *Values at Work: The Invisible Threads Between People Performance and Profit*, pages 23-28). They are also confused with beliefs and whilst values and beliefs are different, they are inextricably linked and their relationship to each other is worth looking at.

Values are always a consequence of our underlying beliefs. A value can be considered to be a cluster of beliefs about a specific concept. For example, the value of 'honesty' is simply a title or name we give to a collection of beliefs we hold about the importance or preference we have for being honest; beliefs such as: 'it always pays to be honest' or 'honesty will set you free' or 'people only trust you when you're consistently honest.'

These beliefs have a variety of sources. Many are picked up from or indoctrinated into us during our developing years by parents, teachers, religious leaders, siblings, friends, coaches, bosses, the media, movies, books and personal experience. As these beliefs are repeatedly experienced and reinforced over the years we evaluate them for their relevancy in our own lives. If the beliefs and the values they come to represent prove to consistently reassure us or provide meaning amidst an increasingly complex world, then we will adopt these values as our own.

These adopted values and beliefs become part of our life and working preferences and will ultimately determine what is most important to us and why.

## **2. How do values 'work'?**

Values are constantly at work. Wherever human beings are acting, thinking, evaluating, deciding\*, communicating, planning, serving, counting, or aspiring, values are at work. (\*Research has proven that people base all their decisions more on their values than they do on rational analysis<sup>1</sup>.) Values guide behaviour and thinking and provide focus and a sense of direction. They indicate what is most important to individuals, groups and organisations, and form the basis of any group or organisational culture.

When a collection of people come together in an organisation the range of values and associated beliefs operating can vary enormously and lead to an extremely complex social system or culture. The ability for any culture to function effectively is predetermined by the degree to which there is a consistent and aligned set of values that form the social and intellectual framework of the group or organisation.

A group's or organisation's culture is a result of the values at work within the group or organisation, enabling values to be seen as the DNA of an organisation's culture. Just like DNA, values provide clues to understanding the larger and more tangible aspects of human beings' social, productive and creative interaction.

## **3. Can values be used to explore and understand group dynamics and behaviour?**

Values provide a very useful means of identifying and understanding the underlying motivational factors of group dynamics that are simply not observable or measurable at a purely behavioural level. A recent report on the performance of the NASA space programme provides an interesting example of the potential for looking at performance from an underlying values and beliefs perspective as opposed to a purely surface, behavioural perspective.

Following the Columbia disaster on February 1st, 2003, the space agency has undergone an extensive, externally-managed audit of their performance and processes. The resulting report suggested "NASA's organisational culture and structure had as much to do with this accident as the external tank foam" [which resulted in the explosion]<sup>2</sup>.

The audit revealed that people within the space programme operated in a "self protective culture" where it became acceptable for managers to ignore increasing levels of risk, to the point where it became the norm for there to be flaws in the shuttle system. The report found for example "that members of the debris assessment team feared being singled out for possible ridicule" because of repeatedly voicing concerns to management about the insulation breaking away shortly after take off.

The report suggested that the self-protective nature of managers' decision-making had a direct influence on the resulting disaster. For this to happen, individuals would have overridden operational values such as quality, precision and accountability with their personal values such as: safety (personal), security (their own and their family's), work (keeping their job), and competition (with the debris assessment team). *Note: Without access to information that would enable us to identify the actual values at work in this situation, the values mentioned are our examples of what they could have been.*

This example helps us understand three principles fundamental to the relationship between values and group dynamics.

1. Personal values will always override organisational or operational values
2. All behaviour is values & belief based
3. Aligned personal and organisational/operational values are key to peak performance

Through our values processes, many organisations have found frequent examples of misaligned values leading to internal sabotage of performance and productivity. Whilst these examples are not as dramatic as the Columbia disaster, they had similar influence on group and individual behaviour, affecting both the people concerned and the organisation.

The difference of perspective between two sets of values results in a number of undesirable outcomes ranging from soaring costs, failed projects, loss of good people and loss of time, to theft, dismissal and even the eventual collapse of the whole organisation. The fact that the warning signs for this type of scenario can be identified through values is an invaluable precaution or 'heads up' for any management team.

#### **4. Can values really be measured?**

If we take measure to mean the ability to identify values and determine a group's or organisation's experience of those values, then yes, values are very measurable. Identifying values is possible because people use nouns to label the concept or idea that is the value e.g. 'honesty'. From this starting point it becomes possible to measure peoples' experience of honesty and their associated behaviours, thereby making the value of honesty measurable.

Values identification is a complex process and to get it right the measurement process needs to be robust, unbiased, tested, universally applicable, and objective. The identification process must also be capable of distinguishing values from emotions, morals, ethics, virtues, principles, and beliefs. After extensive research throughout all English language based measurement processes, only one has emerged as meeting all the necessary criteria. That process is known as the AVI (A Values Inventory). For the background to AVI and its validation see reference<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. How can people use values to help them achieve their desired objectives?

Through the use of the AVI it is possible to identify which values are influencing an individual or group. Peoples' values fall into three distinct categories known as Control values (values that relate to concepts/ideas about control), Ethical values (values that people believe should be adhered to when dealing with one another) and Development values (values that relate to concepts/ideas about developing, discovering or creating something new e.g. processes, systems, learning, concepts or ideas).

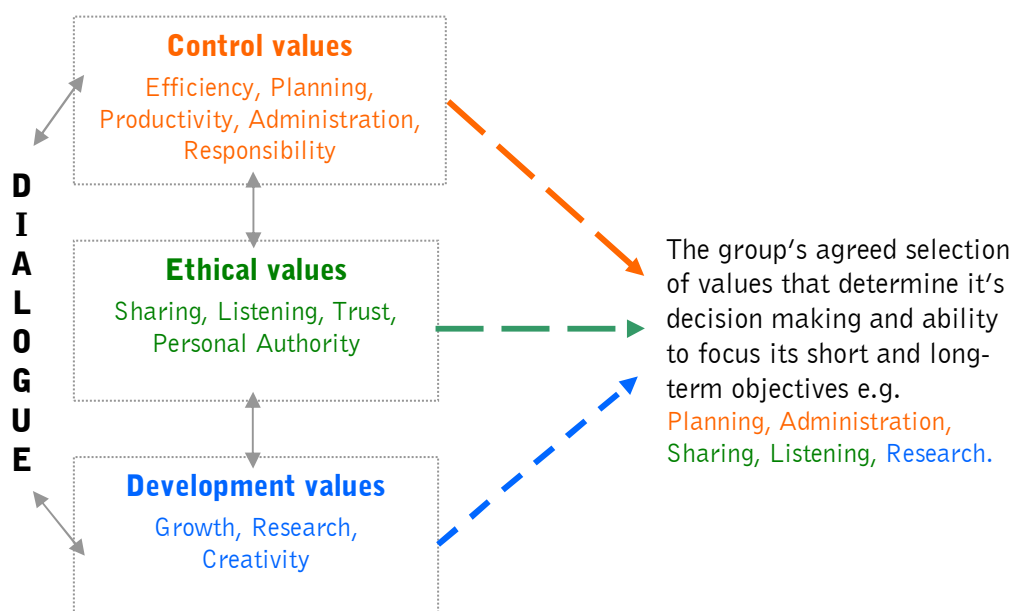
Most people have a combination of all three types of values, however, the priority they have on each of the three distinct groups can vary enormously. Some people will tend to favour, or have a higher priority on either the Control values or the Development values. This favouring, or prioritisation, has a direct effect on their decision-making which influences the way they achieve desired objectives.

The mix of Control and Development values also indicates potential conflicting viewpoints and decision-making styles that will influence the capabilities of a group or organisation. This is where the Ethical values come into play. A group's Ethical values provide the framework and guidelines for being able to work together and communicate effectively with each other.

Within any organisation it is this dialogue between a group's or organisation's Control values with its Development values (as determined by its Ethical values) that influence a team's ability to achieve both its long and short-term objectives.

Diagram 1 shows the relationship of the three value sets on a group's capability for decision making and achieving objectives. (Examples of the values in each set are from the AVI.)

**Diagram 1**



## 6. How can you measure team values?

The 125 values of the AVI can each be attributed to one of the three categories discussed in FAQ 5. This means a team can begin to understand the values-based dynamics that are influencing the groups thinking and decision-making.

Although many organisations put a considerable amount of time, money and energy into team building and team development, much of this is focused on the behavioural aspects of a team. Now with the use of the values framework outlined in FAQ 5, teams can effectively identify and measure the underlying values that are driving their behaviours. The scope for team development shifts significantly from working at levels of behaviour and capability to being able to work at levels of values and meaning in an objective way.



Michael Henderson and Dougal Thompson are directors of Values AT Work, a consulting organisation specialising in the clarification and alignment of personal and organisational values. To have your team values determined please contact us.

**Phone** +64 9 372 2045 | **Email** [info@valuesatwork.org](mailto:info@valuesatwork.org) | **Website** [www.valuesatwork.org](http://www.valuesatwork.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Research paper courtesy of The Minessence Group, [www.minessence.net](http://www.minessence.net)

<sup>2</sup> (2003) NZ Herald on Thursday August 28<sup>th</sup>, p B1.

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, M. and Thompson, D. (2003) *Values at Work: The Invisible Threads Between People Performance and Profit*. Harper Collins Business, Auckland NZ. Pg 183-186 and 193-208.