

# Values

“Values are like fingerprints. Nobody’s are the same, but you leave them all over everything you do.”

—Elvis Presley<sup>1</sup>

If values are the representation of how we move through the world, or our uniquely individual and deeply rooted guideposts, principles are the guardrails, or hard boundaries, we set for ourselves to describe what we stand for. In addition to values and principles—our own or those of our teams—we aspire to (sometimes) utopian ideals of a future state of greatness: a team so well oiled and aligned that literally anything we put our minds to is possible. Leading in this new intentional paradigm requires **understanding the function of values, principles and aspirations**, and creating the conditions for your teammates and the organization to express them.

## Values

Values are alive within each of us and our teams, whether we identify and verbalize them or not. **Values reflect our beliefs and motivations, and they are relative to each person, not universally held.** They provide the frame for how we interpret and interact with the world: what’s important, what’s possible, what’s dangerous.

According to Jackie Le Fevre of values consultancy Magma Effect, values lie deep within the unconscious: “Values are energy-laden ideas that sit in the limbic area of the brain where there is no language. The limbic functions in terms of what it feels rather than what it ‘thinks’ or ‘knows.’ Together our beliefs and values function as a kind of background operating system. This gives us an internal autopilot sense of how the world works and where we fit in, enabling us to develop our own shorthand ways of navigating everyday events.”<sup>2</sup>

Landing on a set of shared values for a team may or may not be possible, and it’s not always necessary. Ask whether the collective alignment of your personal beliefs (values) is more or less important than how they get expressed (principles). If you know that in order for your team to express its unique purpose, everyone’s core values need to unambiguously align, then invest in that hard work of defining your shared values. Otherwise, focusing on

principles can make room for diverse values and leverage that diversity for broader impact.

One of the first realizations when moving to a less hierarchical way of leading is that in traditional organizations, the articulation of what’s important comes from those at “the top”—whether that is the founder or CEO, their team or another group with the necessary context and mandate. By questioning the usefulness of this approach, everyone in the organization can challenge their own previous powerlessness of trying to enact what they imagine their managers think is important. Instead everyone can start intuiting and articulating what they sense is appropriate for the organization.

**When values are less visible and hard to interpret, we sometimes find our values colliding with others.** Just as we can all relate to the idea that we are naturally more attracted to those who value the same things we do—we also all have the experience of being “caught up” in that assumption, whether in friendship or romance or at work. Caught in the flush of a new relationship, we see what we want to see, and that’s often mistaken as a reflection of shared values. We become dismayed when, over time, the other person shows their “true colors.”

<sup>1</sup> Elvis Presley quoted in Rich Smith, “Values Are Like Fingerprints,” Atlas Medstaff, Adventures in Nursing blog, May 1, 2019, <https://atlasmedstaff.com/adventures-in-nursing/values-are-like-fingerprints/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Le Fevre quoted in Helen Sanderson, “Values and Beliefs—What They Mean for Wellbeing Teams,” LinkedIn, January 10, 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/values-beliefs-what-mean-wellbeing-teams-helen-sanderson-frsa/>.

## Value Priorities Matter

Natalia Lombardo from consulting company The Hum offers her perspective:

When I say “values,” I think about a list of characteristics and ideals that are important to me. Ways of being that I try to embody or grow into. So when I think about being “values aligned” with you, I assume that your list of values is similar to mine. But **it’s not just the items on the list that matter, it’s also the order in which we prioritize them.**

For example, let’s say that my values—in order of importance—are:

- Respect
- Integrity
- Care
- Honesty
- Autonomy

And yours are:

- Autonomy
- Freedom
- Enjoyment
- Care
- Integrity

According to that list, we share many of the same values. But the fact that we each place them with different importance in our list will make us act in different ways.<sup>3</sup>



## Value Definitions Matter

If you do go down the values path, it’s incredibly important not only to land on your value words but also to demand precise definitions, as Helen Sanderson and Jackie Le Fevre point out:

Compare these two descriptions of compassion. The first from a large hospital trust and the second from Wellbeing Teams.

1. Compassion means “we use a person-centered approach in all our interactions with colleagues, patients, clients and their families.”
2. Compassion means “actively hearing and sensing another’s thoughts and feelings, being kind and finding empathetic ways to support individuals and each other to achieve positive outcomes.”

Nothing wrong with either and some description is far better than no description, particularly if arriving at the description has been a participatory process.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Natalia Lombardo, “When Values Collide,” Medium, The Tuning Fork, March 31, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-tuning-fork/when-values-collide-48991f110902>.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Sanderson and Jackie Le Fevre, “Values in Practice—from Intention to Action,” Helen Sanderson, September 12, 2018, <http://helensanderson.net/2018/09/values-in-practice-from-intention-to-action/>.

## Values in action

**The best test of meaningful values in an organization is if and how they are used in guiding decisions.** The team at Ecosia, a social business and internet search engine provider, uses their values as guideposts. Even with a strong social purpose, they routinely rely on their values—impact, integrity, sustainability, leadership, user focus and happiness—when making difficult decisions. Should we scale right now? Should we invest our limited resources in improving the product? Are we pushing ourselves too hard and risking burnout? Are we giving each other good feedback and enough of it? Each of Ecosia's values is further defined using a short statement and brief paragraph. They hashtag their values in internal communications when team members propose projects or changes that are values aligned.

## When values conflict

An organization may have two values that conflict. ET Group, a self-managing technology integration company looking to bring harmony to work and workplace with technology, has four guiding values: accountability, growth, customer collaboration and teamwork. The value of growth encourages "building capacity through financial stability, profitability and efficiency," while customer collaboration means "proactively partnering with our clients." In the short term, partnering with clients can cut into profits and take extra time. Conflicting values challenge the team to consider trade-offs, speak candidly about the issues and find solutions that best further the organization's purpose. These are the hard yet necessary decisions required to keep ET Group on track.

## Reflect and Act on Personal and Organization Values

What personal values do you hold and how do they shape your decisions?

Clarifying your values and making them transparent can be a crucial step within a well functioning team. A great place to start is by completing the free Personal Values Assessment from the Barrett Values Centre ([valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva](https://valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva)). It takes less than ten minutes and provides more information than you would expect for a quick test. You can also reflect on and review your values one at a time by asking:

- Why is this value important to me?
- In moments when I deeply live this value, what behaviors do I exhibit?
- How might I react if this value was not being honored by others?
- How do I want this value to show up in my career and my life?

## Creating Good Organizational Values

Good values in an organization are best unearthed rather than invented. The company 1-Degree partners with organizations to define and align on their values. It names five parts of a good value definition: a single word to name the value, a short definition of the value (five to seven words max) to add clarity, five behaviors that show this value in practice, two or three behaviors that signal the value might be slipping and a story that illustrates the value in action. Using these five elements, LifeLearn, an organization that educates and communicates solutions to improve animal health and wellness, articulates its value of passion this way:

*Value:* Passion

*Short definition:* Improving animal health with gusto!

*This looks like:* bringing energy and a positive attitude to difficult challenges, creating space for fun and humor, being open to new and better ideas, celebrating wins both externally and internally.

*What's unacceptable:* spreading negative energy, saying, "It's not my job," just showing up.

*Story:* It's like a dog happily engaged in active sport.

Because our values most often lay hidden, they remain implicit, not clearly visible to others and often not even to ourselves. Principles, on the other hand, can be negotiated and openly declared by a team. Our principles can help us form explicit agreements on how a team works together and how individuals conduct themselves.

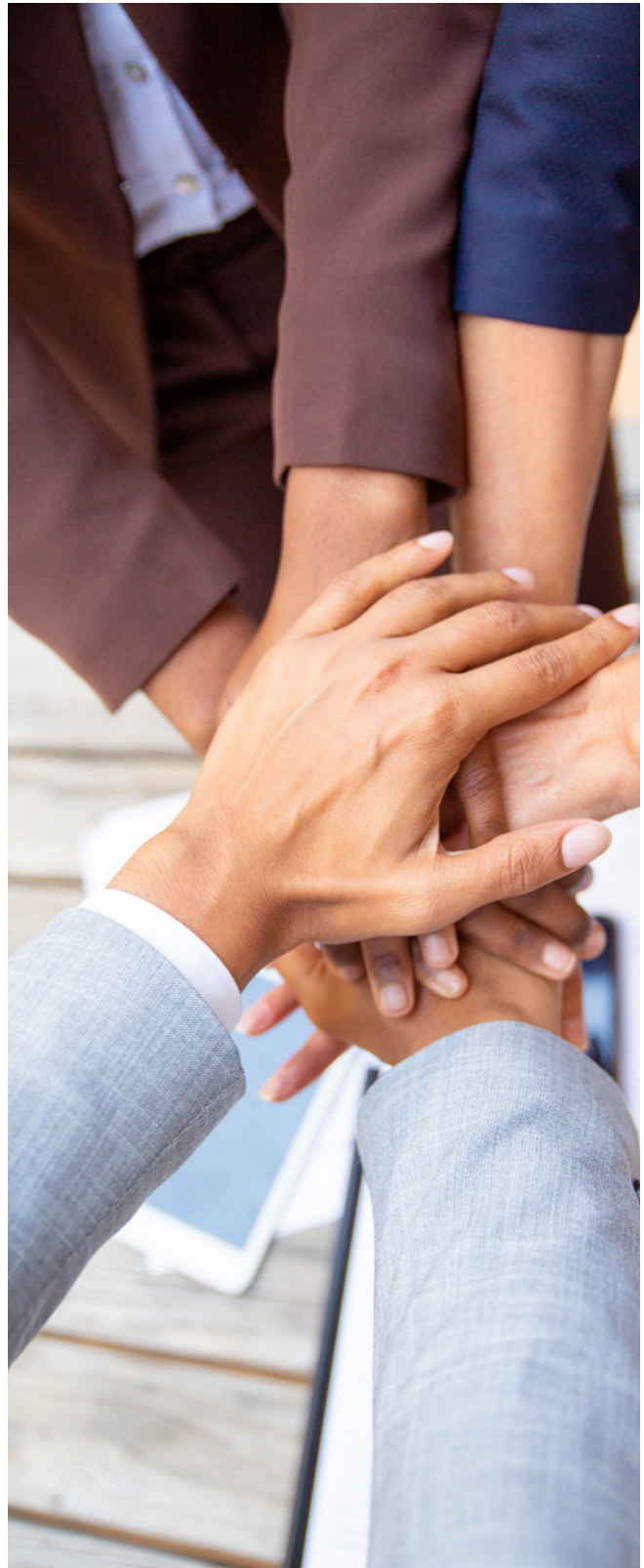
## Principles

**Principles are the terms of engagement.** They articulate our hard boundaries, and unlike with values, all team members must agree to act within the intent of team principles. If they can't or won't, they need to be somewhere else. What are your team's uncrossable lines, your principles?

Based on his experience working with Morning Star, a California-based tomato processor built on a foundational philosophy of self-management, author and TEDx speaker Doug Kirkpatrick is unambiguous: "First, human beings should not use force or coercion against other human beings. Second, people should honor the commitments they make to others."<sup>5</sup> He notes that the company ran solely on the basis of these principles for years before they were further fleshed out. And to this day, if you do not agree to abide by these principles, you can't work at Morning Star.

**Each time a new team comes together, the members need to determine a set of principles or adopt a set already established elsewhere.** Enspiral's guidance for support pods (teams within the Enspiral ecosystem) offers prompts for establishing principles that new groups may choose to apply:

- We acknowledge and articulate our personal boundaries.
- Once agreed, we respect our cadence and other logistical requirements.
- We acknowledge the source of our ideas and/or the lineage we are following.



<sup>5</sup>Doug Kirkpatrick, "Creating the Twenty-First-Century Organization through Organizational Self-Management in the New World of Work," Doug Kirkpatrick, accessed June 8, 2020, <https://dougkirkpatrick.com/speaking/>.



## Aspirations

Aspirations—**intentions of how a group would like to work together that are not yet fully true**—are yet another set of ideals often confused with current values. It's not uncommon for teams to believe that "because we name a principle, it must be true and present."

When new teams come together, they clearly aren't yet aware of their capabilities or capacities. As with everything, we learn what's possible by and through doing the work together. For some teams, just kicking into the work may be appropriate. Others find benefit in taking the time to articulate higher-level intentions of potential.

### Example Aspiration From a Recently Formed Team

A recently formed team that a colleague, Susan Basterfield, is working with articulated their aspirations in their second meeting together:

#### *We are creative*

We channel our collective creative energy to achieve our goals. We optimize our ways of working for flow and moments of delight.

#### *We are excellent*

We hold ourselves and each other to high standards. We're highly capable in our roles: we play the music, not the instrument.

#### *We are idealistic*

We strive to be the best version of ourselves, and we support each other in those aspirations. We assume good intent from others, and we give feedback in the same way—candidly, honestly and kindly.

#### *We are pragmatic*

We recognize constraints and we adapt to the times. We're time-and-space agnostic: we default to asynchronous communication and create artifacts for others to augment and share—but we understand that there are also times to come together and optimize for connection.

#### *We are resilient*

We handle setbacks by finding alternatives. We avoid single points of failure and step in to support each other in our roles. When challenges arise, we recognize them clearly, articulate them and find ways to solve them.

This team has no idea yet if the above is true, but for them it was important to set the intention—their aspirations. It has given them something to circle around as they spin up. They intend to check in on these aspirations frequently, in order to collectively surface patterns and practices that may help to realize them. Eventually, these aspirations may become lived values or they may evolve into something else.

**Everyone needs points of orientation.** Purpose is one. Values, principles and aspirations provide additional bearings. To be effective within a team setting, you need to work with your colleagues to bring awareness to the precise definitions, collective understanding and shared intentions of each of these orienting features. Think of starting a long journey by car with your teammates as fellow travelers. First, you need a sense of where you are heading and why. As you drive, it's helpful to have clear boundaries, guardrails along the most treacherous portions and Do Not Enter signs ensuring you don't make a wrong turn. You don't need these tools at every moment of the journey, but having them at key points can be the difference between thriving and barely surviving.

To learn more about how you can apply values in your organization, reach out to us at [connect@humanfirstworks.com](mailto:connect@humanfirstworks.com)