Career Compass No. 57:

Leading by Living Your Values

Values should guide our decisions and actions, especially in times of uncertainty and change.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I am a division manager in a recreation and parks department in a mid-sized city. I oversee a staff of 15 full-time employees as well as part-time and seasonal workers who focus on youth recreation and other programming. Recognizing that our city and department are facing ongoing budget uncertainties, our new department director (in consultation with the city manager) wants us to shift to more fee-based programming (such as instructional classes), cut our no-charge after-school programs, which serve low-income and disadvantaged youth, and eliminate some staffing.

Don't let your values get lost in the flock.

These proposals have upset me and our staff, who are dedicated to helping youth and families in need. It just does not feel right. We need to be serving disadvantaged youth who do not have the resources of other youth in our community. Moreover, I am committed to my team and their invaluable work with young people.

What do I do?

DR. BENEST: I believe that you are experiencing quite a bit of unease because these budget proposals threaten your core values. Given our commitment to work and the hours we devote to our careers, we all struggle with any decisions or actions that are inconsistent or conflict with our values. Recognizing your

dedication to service, especially to those in need, and your commitment to your team, you need to speak up and dissent and engage in some creative problem-solving.

As part of your leadership role, you must assert your values and do your best to influence others for the good of all. That's what leadership is all about. In addition, you speak as the division manager for your team and need to represent their views.

So, how do you lead by living your values?

What Are Values?

Values are one's beliefs about what is good and important in life. They influence our attitudes and help us create standards for our own behavior and for judging the actions of others.

Some typical values might center around

- Family
- Community
- Service
- Justice
- Competence
- Achievement
- Courage
- Creativity
- Fun
- Adventure
- Hard work
- Harmony
- Self-reliance
- Peace
- Lifelong learning
- Love

Why Are Values Important?

Knowing our values is important because they

- Guide our decisions and actions, especially in times of uncertainty and change.
- Make us more predictable to others.
- Help us take those risks that are aligned with our values.

How Do We Identify Our Core Values?

A lot of us have not spent much time thinking about and clarifying our values. To help you clarify your core or driving values, you can create a list of values, select your top three values, and then write a paragraph or two about the top values that drive your behavior.

Another good way to clarify your core values is to reflect about your life story and identify a person or an experience that has shaped you as a person and a leader. Ask yourself:

- How did that person or experience shape me?
- How did that person or experience affect my core values?

When I did this exercise, I focused on my mother Rosy who was a very involved community member in my hometown, a working-class Caucasian and Latino community in Southern California. One evening Rosy took me as a young boy to a city council meeting. She had read about a police incident that she thought unjustly disrupted and broke up a large Mexican family wedding celebration in town. Rosy got up at the council meeting, protested the police action, and demanded that the council and city manager investigate the incident. Obviously, this experience affected not only my career choice but helped forge my value for justice.

How Can a Crucible Experience Clarify My Values?

You might also want to think of a "crucible experience." A crucible experience is a situation that was very difficult and challenging and created adversity for you. How did you respond? (See Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas article "Crucibles of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept 22, 2002.)

As a young human services department director, early in my career, I faced a crucible experience when the mayor and a few council members wanted to use the police force to push homeless people out of the downtown. The city manager did not seem to care about the issue and was willing to go along. In my gut, I did not feel it was right. I worked with the human services commission to explore some other options. The commission and human services staff asked the council for some time to study and respond to the homelessness challenge. I organized a team of staff including police, merchants, a commissioner, and several homeless people; looked at how other communities were responding; and then proposed with the team a homeless services project.

There was much opposition in the community and some of us were vilified at public meetings discussing the issue. However, we persevered and finally secured council approval. The pilot project did not solve all the problems, but based on my values I believe that the project moved our government and community in the right direction.

Values need to be "stress-tested"—only in adversity do we understand what is truly important to us. Reflecting on this crucible helped me clarify and solidify my values of social justice and compassion, gave me confidence that I could survive and respond to adversity, and shaped my future leadership practice.

Great leaders are self-reflective and know their life stories. You can only know your own story by looking backwards and connecting the dots (see YouTube video of [Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Address](#)).

It seems that you, too, are committed to service and social justice/equity and to the team and community. You are thus compelled to speak out and act.

How Do I Act Consistently with My Values?

Since your values compel you to act, you must first understand your core values. Once you acknowledge which values drive your behavior, you should differentiate between *values* and *practices* (see [ICMA "Leading Ideas" video interview of Jim Collins on "Good To Great"](#)). You won't abandon values to keep a job. However, there are many practices that would allow you to stay consistent with your values. You can make compromises about practices, but not values.

In your case, you will not compromise on your value of social justice and commitment to team. However, you may be open to a variety of practical approaches to achieve your value. For example, in respect to the no-charge after-school program for disadvantaged youth, you are compelled to advocate for the program need.

First, before advocating (without shrillness), have you understood and acknowledged the city's budget realities? As Steven Covey stated in his [Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#), first seek to understood, then to be understood.

Second, have you worked with the recreation and parks director and the other department managers to identify realistic options and other practices to reduce budget expenditures and raise revenue so you can preserve your team of talent and the work you all do?

Third, as you develop your proposals to serve disadvantaged youth amid budget cutbacks, have you framed the need differently for different groups, tied the after-school program to the larger city council or city manager agenda, incorporated the interests of other stakeholders (e.g., police, faith-based groups, schools, and neighborhood associations), and gotten everyone's "finger prints" on the program? (See [Career Compass No. 14: Selling Your Ideas](#))

In the process of acting upon your value, you must be open to different practices or practical approaches consistent with your value. For instance, have you looked at

- Partnering with other groups.
- Charging an affordable, though below-market, rate fee.
- Securing scholarships or sponsorships.
- Cutting lower-priority programs to fund higher-priority goals.
- Reducing the work week to preserve staffing.

There are opportunities and problems with all these options but they can be explored and pursued in your effort to stand up for your values.

How Do I Engage Others in Sharing and Acting Upon Values?

It is important to talk about and explore values with your team and others. There are several approaches. First, you can engage your staff in a structured values clarification exercise, such as writing about one's values. In a more informal way, you can share in staff meetings or retreats a vignette from your life story or a crucible experience, and ask others to do the same. You can then explore as a group where your individual values coincide and where do they do not. I imagine that many if not most people in your division are committed to service and community.

Second, given some of your shared values, you can discuss with the group your shared purpose or "collective ambition" (see Career Compass No. 49: Building High-Performing Teams—What's the Magic?). Purpose and meaning are powerful motivators that drive behavior.

Third, it is important that you and others share "stories" about your program experiences that illuminate your values and make your values come alive (see Career Compass No. 50: Story-Telling—A Powerful Way To Lead and Communicate). For example, you can ask staff to share stories of youth who are struggling, making mistakes, learning from their experiences, and growing and developing with the support of program staff.

Finally, debriefing with staff our collective experiences help us all stay consistent to our values. When we debrief a recent experience, we ask

- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- What did we learn for future practice?
- To what degree were our work behaviors consistent with our shared values?

Based on these kinds of discussions, you and your team can identify specific behaviors congruent with your shared values. For instance, to what extent are we acting in the best interests of disadvantaged youth? Are we actually helping youth become more self-aware and develop skills and other capacities to succeed in the world? In terms of our value of "team," to what degree are we in real life actually supporting each other?

As Dan Rockwell stressed in his Leadership Freak blog of December 8, 2015, values that aren't tied to behaviors are meaningless.

How Do I Make Values Come Alive?

Let me suggest several ways to make values come alive for you as a leader and others.

1. *Focus on just a few values and related behaviors*

To make values real, select no more than two or three values on which to focus. Then identify with your team several critical behaviors that will support the priority value. For example, if customer service is

important as a value to you and the team, identify the key behaviors (e.g., active listening) and protocols (e.g., giving authority to frontline staff to fix a problem on the spot) necessary for providing great customer care.

To ensure that these behaviors are practiced, you need to

- Provide training.
- Emphasize these behaviors in performance conversations and formal evaluations.
- Debrief instances when team members did or did not fully live up to the value.
- "Catch" employees living the value and exhibiting the behaviors, and then communicate these "proof points" validating that the team is living the value.
- Celebrate instances in which team members provided great customer service.

As Eastern philosophy suggests, if you want to change your way of being, you must change your way of doing.

2. Model values

The most powerful way to make values come alive is through modeling. If you want people's behavior to reflect certain values, you must model and demonstrate that value in tangible ways. For instance, as a leader, you can't just talk about the need for people to trust each other. You must model trust by providing building keys to the staff or promoting flexibility in scheduling given the different needs of staff as well as the needs of your clientele.

3. Refer to shared values as you make decisions

When making a decision, refer back to values. If you are making budget cuts or deciding where to invest limited monies, refer to your core values or the shared and stated values of the group.

4. Hire and promote for values

One of the best ways to make values come alive is to hire and promote for values. You can train for skills but you must ensure that your team is composed of the right people who exhibit the right values and related behaviors. Southwest Airlines hires for its corporate values, such as dedication to the customer and to each other, and creating fun experiences for all.

In hiring people, you can do reference checks probing for values and ask behavior-based questions in interviews. For example, if you want to hire a staff person who demonstrates learning agility, you can ask candidates to share a recent experience in which they faced a challenge for which they knew little and how they responded.

5. Inculcate for values

As part of your onboarding process with new hires, explore the shared values of the group and the "collective ambitions" and aspirations of the team. In your onboarding activities, ask current staff to tell a few stories illuminating those values and ambitions.

6. *Appoint a values guardian*

To ensure that decisions and behaviors stay aligned with values, you as division manager can appoint on a rotating basis a "values guardian." The guardian is empowered and supported in questioning whether certain decisions or recent actions are consistent with the stated values of the group.

7. *Celebrate value champs*

When you see someone living up to the values and aspirations of the group, recognize and celebrate them. They become the role models for the team. In Palo Alto, California, we wanted to promote the value of smart risks, so we recognized those who stuck their necks out with the "Turtle Award."

8. *Get coaching to fulfill your values*

Get coaching from others not just for career advancement but from those who can help you "find and express your best self." (See Dan Rockwell's *Leadership Freak* blog item "Succeeding With Three Challenges That Derail Leaders," February 12, 2016.) Find someone who shares many of your core values and is savvy enough to help you navigate organizational life in order to make values come alive.

Values Matter!

Values are important to who we are as human beings and as leaders. Consequently, we must seek to

- Explore our own life stories to identify core values that drive our behavior.
- Stand up for our values and the shared values of our team.
- Align our decisions and behaviors with our values.
- Differentiate values and practices.
- Make our values come alive through organizational practices.

By practicing our values, we can become our best self and the best leader we can be.