



Pay Attention to Your Values: they provide a key framework in decision-making

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The Collins English Dictionary defines values of a person or group as the moral principles and beliefs they think are important. Brené Brown has a similar definition in her book *'Dare to Lead'* where she describes values as 'a way of *being* or *believing* that we hold important'. In her book and talks, Brown really emphasizes the '*being*' part, which is how a value

is expressed through behaviour. In her book she lists about 100 possible values. Examples are wide-ranging and include concepts such as *accountability, equality, integrity, freedom, dignity, well-being, balance, faith, giving back, patience, and wealth*. To take the value from concept to behaviour, it is necessary to be specific.

From her extensive research, Brown contends that a leader is always clear about their values, and that leaders do more than profess them, they 'action' them. She says ideally leaders should choose only two *core* values. After choosing, the next step is to articulate how each of these values can be demonstrated by behaviour or action. In short, how a leader would 'operationalize' their chosen core values. Commitment to your values means aligning your behaviour and decisions with your values in both personal and professional settings. It also involves being aware when we are not in line with our core values and requires that as leaders, we 'reset' when we veer off course. It's about being accountable *to* your values, in particular to the core values deemed most important.

The same advice holds true for organizations that are working through their business models. An organizational business model asks about 'Who we are' - 'What we do' - 'How we do it' - 'How we finance it'. Values are important in guiding choices in all these areas. It is about taking actions within the framework of professed values.

In Brown's podcast 'Unlocking Us: Living into your values', she reveals that from her research only about 10 percent of companies have been clear with their staff how company values are being operationalized. Staff from the vast majority of companies report that they are aware of the organization's values but are unable to express how the company has operationalized them.

My first-hand experience of this dissonance happened when the organization I worked for professed 'Work-Life' balance for staff as a key value. When pressed for flexible working hours, the executive refused to consider it. Employees then asked about how the organization planned to operationalize 'Work-Life' balance, and the executive could not point to any specific policy or programme. Aside from the credibility hit the organization took that day, it was a disconnecting moment between staff and that organization.

I believe it would be useful for citizens of a country to reflect and contemplate their country's core values and how well these values are reflected through governing parties. It might make for some useful and provocative dinner conversations. Values constitute an important part of individual, organizational and even national identity. As these change, identity can change, individually or as a group. For example, South Africa 'reset' its

international identity when it dismantled its system of apartheid. It's a clear example of a change in a country's value set as displayed through its actions as a nation.

A core value can be *both* a core value and a strength. For example, Brené Brown has identified 'curiosity' as one of her core values, but she also acknowledges it as one of her strengths. The role of values vs strength in decision making can easily be confused, making it important to distinguish how each should be used. In a planning process with a not-for-profit organization, we were able to help the group recognize that 'uniqueness' was not a core value for them. They agreed that if they stopped being a unique provider in their field it did not mean they needed to change their programming in any fundamental way. It was moved under the 'strengths' column, allowing them to really focus on those core values that are most important to them. Strengths function as 'necessities' to get the job done, or as a competitive advantage, and can change over time as the context changes. In contrast, core values function as 'deal breakers'. If an action compromises a core value, then to remain 'coherent' either the action needs to be modified, or the value needs to be changed.

A lack of coherence and compliance between our values and actions means a lack of honesty regarding the 'who we are' statements when planning our organizational business model. On an individual level, it communicates a lack of authenticity vis a vis our identity. At the country level it introduces incongruence in our nation building and messaging of our national values. The lack of coherence can lead to a series of problems in matters of credibility, trustworthiness and connection with others. Reputational damage is a likely outcome.

Under the Six Thinking Hats methodology¹, alignment of values is assessed in the Black Hat sessions where the team lists all the risks, problems, or obstacles related to the issue at hand. It is here where a team would assess if values were being compromised by the contemplated action or decision. A perennial problem in the traditional decision-making process of debate and argument is that arguments can become circular, and exclusionary. Exclusionary because arguments are generally dominated by a few strong personalities, and valuable input is often not tabled due to lack of time, or a 'compromised' atmosphere.

The power of the Six Thinking Hats methodology is its effectiveness in eliminating argument and debate. Consequently, there is more time to collect the diversity of input from all participants. It's a powerful tool to ensure that 'the smartest person in the room is the room', that is, a collection of input from *all*.

The Six Thinking Hats process involves 'carving out' time under each direction of the six different directions of thinking. The parallel and sequential nature of the Six Thinking Hats methodology is a facilitation process that involves focusing on one direction at a time. Directions of Thinking are categories such as:

- What specifically are we here to discuss? (Blue Hat)
- What information do we have? (White Hat)
- What are the benefits of taking this action? (Yellow Hat)
- How do we feel about this action? (Red Hat)
- What problems does this action present? (Black Hat), and finally
- What ideas do we have to overcome problems? (Green Hat).

The separation of these six different directions of thinking almost always results in a broader analysis of the issue at hand because argument and debate, which can consume a large part of a meeting, is taken out of this equation.

¹ See our 6-minute video explanation: https://youtu.be/S_PJ-dNuf_Q?si=iHxJf01izm9wizJT

In the context of assessing how an action might impact core values, the question of *'Are we compromising our principles or values?'* is discussed under the time allocated to Black Hat thinking. Everyone's focus and attention is geared to discussing only the problems and risks that might occur from an action, and that includes if values are compromised. It is where the team will do their disaster check regarding an action they are contemplating. Compromising values can have far-reaching effects and disastrous outcomes. Therefore, it is critical to have the space for this discussion.

Whether it is organizations, individuals or countries who are making decisions, naming, understanding and remaining aligned with values is a key part of one's identity. It is the 'who you are', and 'who you present' to the external world. I completed this exercise about five years ago when I first read *Dare to Lead*. However, it is with the passing of time that I have come to realize its importance in guiding me, not only through some really difficult decisions, but also in 'staying the course'. It is really worth taking the 'dive' ... you won't regret it.

Resources

The resources below may help get you started:

- Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: List of Values*, <https://brenebrown.com/resources/dare-to-lead-list-of-values/>
- Brené Brown and Barrett Guillen, *On Living Into Our Values*, Podcast (January 26, 2022): <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/living-into-our-values/>
- David La Piana (2019). *The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution: Real-Time Strategic Planning in a Rapid-Response World*, <https://www.lapiana.org/insight/the-nonprofit-strategy-revolution-2/>

Learn More

At ThinkWell Training and Facilitation, we delve into how this small change in approaching issues can have a profound impact on clarity, understanding and decision making. In our *Six Thinking Hats* Training, as well as our *Serious Creativity* Training, we show how this can improve both critical thinking and creativity skills for leaders and teams.

If you are interested to learn more, check out the 6-minute explainer video on the [Six Thinking Hats Methodology](#). For more insights and knowledge about the *Six Directions of Thinking*, you can pick up Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* book from your local bookstore or library.

Let us know what your learning needs are and how we can help. We are happy to explore training and facilitation options that would fit your team and situation.

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