

“Values” is a buzzword that risks being abused into oblivion. But despite the hype, clarity about what’s important to us is a powerful lever for making us more successful *according to our own definition of success*.

Whether we’re conscious of them or not, our values (organizational and personal) define our behavior. One of the reasons “values” gets a bad rap is that organizations and individuals often claim values that aren’t reflected in their actions. Don’t tell me you value honesty while describing the neat trick you found for cheating on your taxes.

We can all identify characteristics that we know we’re “supposed to” embrace, so we may feel compelled to list them as our values. Even if we limit ourselves to those we truly hold, the list can be quite long. We need a way to acknowledge the common characteristics we believe in while highlighting those few distinctive attributes that set us apart.

A Values Framework

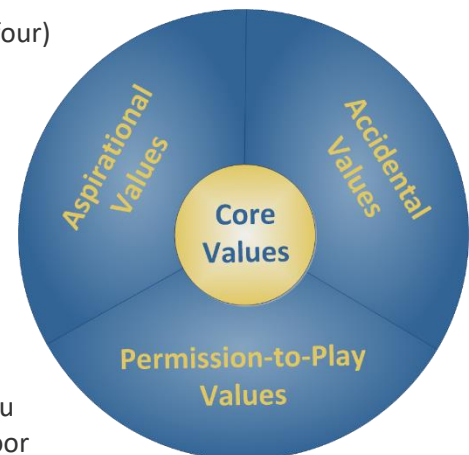
In his book, [The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else In Business](#), Patrick Lencioni provides a useful framework of four types of values. Here’s how I describe them:

Core Values – These are the small number (typically two to four) of inherent behavioral traits that represent the hills you’re willing to die on. You can’t imagine compromising these for anything else. No one could pay you enough to act contrary to these values. *You’re willing to pay practical costs to stand on these principles.* You might refine how they’re worded, but you would never want them to change.

Permission to Play Values – I call these *threshold* values. They are important to you, but most organizations in your industry would say the same thing. These characteristics define your tribe more than they distinctively define you. You have to behave by these standards to get your foot in the door (hence, “threshold”).

Aspirational Values – These things aren’t true about you, but you *want them to be*. They don’t come naturally, so you have to work at them. But they’re important enough that you can point to specific, intentional actions you’re taking to build them.

Accidental Values – Sometimes we develop values because of things that happen *to us*. For example, each person you hire, especially at leadership levels, brings their values (good or bad) into your organization. If you’re not paying attention and being intentional about enforcing your values, their values may impact your culture more than you want.



We all have multiple layers of values of greater or lesser intensity and importance. Clarity about the ones that matter most creates a solid foundation to build upon. Ignore them or leave them to chance and you may regret the monster you create.

Here’s a simple way to validate your values: What behaviors can you point to that demonstrate each value? If they’re hard to find, it’s not a value. If your calendar and checkbook show significant investments in things that don’t tie back to your values, you probably haven’t accurately identified your values.