

Processing Levels of Values ... and Ensuring You End up with an Onion!¹

Values come in many shapes and sizes! They operate at different levels:

- **Some are *deep*** (eg. *All life is sacred*).
- **Some are *thematic*** (eg. *Women are entitled to control their own bodies*).
- **Some are more *behavioural*** (eg. *Selective abortion is wrong*).

You could imagine these different levels as an onion, or ripples in a pond. At the core/centre, are the deepest values that frame the more *thematic* or *behavioural* values:

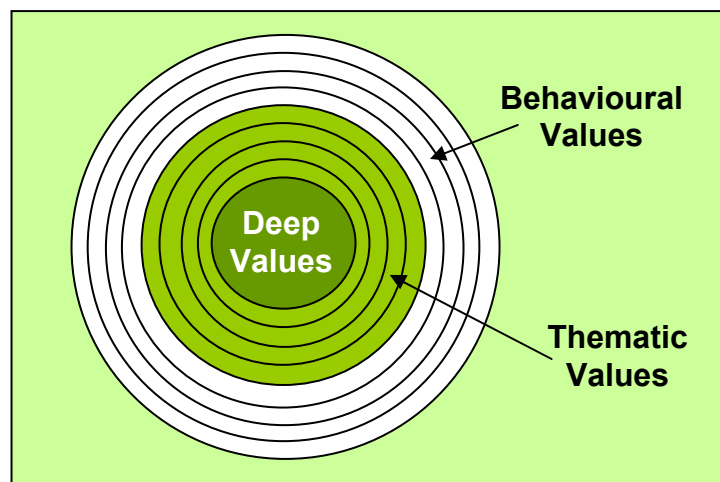


Diagram 1: Onion Analogy - Depth of Values

For individuals who have a clear ideology (packaging/ordering of personal values in a congruent way), their deep values will then be simply reframed as answers to more *thematic* or *behavioural* values questions. The more you have processed your *deep* values, the more quickly and easily you can resolve values issues as they arise in your life.

Why *Group Values* are Difficult to Develop

Every individual has thousands of different beliefs and values. Developing a coherent set of values for a group or organisation is therefore very difficult. The deeper the shared values, the more coherent the group and its actions/decisions will be. However, there is a limited likelihood of finding a group where everyone shares a significant number of deep values.

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In community services organisations, the imperative to develop shared values is high. Workers are making judgments, based in their values, every moment of the day. Management is responsible for making judgments about the policies and procedures that will frame workers' actions and assessing workers' performance. Unless staff and management share values, the organisation is likely to function in an inconsistent, inefficient, conflictual way.

So, how can organisations develop a set of shared values which guide everyone's actions and decisions?

One Approach to Developing Shared Organisational Values

When developing organisational values, it is important to get as close as possible to identifying shared deep values. When processing a values dilemma, if individuals disagree on any value, it can be useful to assess whether this is an area in which the organisation needs to be able to share values in order to be able to function effectively.

To what extent does this area of values relate to the work we do?

Example: In an organisation which has to take a public position on bioethical issues, developing values on *life and death* questions is essential to being able to work together. However, a lack of shared values in this area is unless to affect the effective functioning of an organisation which conducts trades training courses.

Assuming that the organisation needs to hold a values position in an area of contention, it can be useful to **begin with the deepest possible value**, and progressively move toward thematic and behavioural values if no deep values are shared.

An Example Step-by-Step Process:

This example is based on the bioethical example above. However, there are many areas in which staff and management can hold values with an impact on organisational functioning. Some further examples are included as **Attachment 1**.

1. **Begin with the deep value.** Does everyone agree that ***All life is sacred?*** If so, test this with a contentious application (eg. *Should we ban all forms of natural products (eg. wood, leather) within the agency?*). If not:
2. **Explore a more explicit version of the deep value.** Does everyone agree that ***All human life is sacred?*** If so, test this with a scenario (eg. *Should someone be kept endlessly on life support if they have been medically diagnosed as 'brain dead'? or, How do we choose between the life of a mother and foetus, if medical advice suggests that the mother will die in the birth process?*) If not:
3. Identify key themes in the discussion and **try several related thematic values.** For example:

- (a) ***The diversity of human society should be retained.***
(Scenario: Should people be kept poor to maintain diversity? Or, should bionic ears be with-held from children who are deaf?)
- (b) ***Women are responsible for protecting the life of their unborn child.***
(Scenario: Should this apply where the pregnancy is a result of rape? Or, should this apply if all 6 sextuplets are likely to die if some are not aborted?)
- (c) ***Women are entitled to control their own bodies.***
(Scenario: Should women who have chosen to become pregnant be allowed to abort a foetus with a guaranteed, or possible, disability?)
- (d) ***Every adult is entitled to choose to die.***
(Scenario: Should this apply when a cure for their illness is available?)

Again, each thematic value should be tested through contentious scenarios. Assuming that each of the above thematic values survived the *scenario test*, it would not be possible to believe all 4 statements. However, it might be possible to believe (a) and (b), or (c) and (d).

4. Often, **statements need to be made even more explicit**, for example:
- (a) *The diversity of human society should be retained* **could become** *All human beings should be valued, regardless of their sex, class, race, ability or sexuality.*
 - (b) *Women are responsible for protecting the life of their unborn child* **could be extended to ... provided that the child can support its own life outside the mother's body.**
 - (c) *Women are entitled to control their own bodies* **could be extended to ... provided that they do not put the life of a baby able to support its own life at risk.**
 - (d) *Every adult is entitled to choose to die* **could be extended to ... provided they are capable of making a clear choice and have all the information pertinent to their choice.**

With these modifications, it would be possible to believe all 4 statements. It is important to note that (b), (c) and (d) are beginning to become quite behavioural values.

5. Assuming that participants cannot agree on sufficient thematic values to deal with the issues being addressed by the organisation, it may be important to **identify shared behavioural values**.

Example: Everyone may agree that *Selective abortion is wrong*. Assuming that a woman has fully chosen to become pregnant, but discovers that the foetus is likely to have a disability, people who believe in women's right to choose may be prepared to concede that the choice occurred when the woman opted to become pregnant ... that the social consequences of selective abortion (given the advances in gene technology, this could include aborting on the basis of sex, intelligence, sexuality, appearance, etc.) do not justify unlimited individual control over all choices. In this situation, these people would believe that *maintaining social diversity* is a **higher order value** than enabling unfettered individual choice.

If beginning with a thematic or behavioural value, it can be useful to go backwards ... to see what the deeper value underlying this is. Sometimes people come to different thematic or functional conclusions, despite sharing deep values. Identifying the shared deep value may assist individuals in identifying their own incongruent values, and identify key common ground organisationally (in a situation where there is no need for differences).

Processing Values Differences

Having gone through the process above, the organisation will have either:

- identified common ground, or,
- confirmed that values are not shared in essential areas.

If common ground has been found, this does not necessarily mean you have viable organisational values. It is important to test whether the level of common ground identified is sufficient to provide a working basis for the organisation:

- **Structurally**, the organisation must consider whether the level of common ground identified is sufficient to form a viable working basis for the organisation's decisions and actions. If they provide sufficient guidance for the practical situations the organisation faces, that's good. If not, it is important to recognise that irreconcilable values differences exist within the organisation. Given that the organisation must hold a coherent values position on this question to function effectively, the group must decide what level of values are essential to this (deep values? thematic values?). There will inevitably be *winner*s and *loser*s in the outcomes of this process.
- **Personally**, each individual needs to consider whether they can work within an organisation where key thematic or deep values are not shared on the question explored. Is it possible for you to *put aside* those values which were *discarded* or not agreed to during the process, and not assert these personal values in the work setting?

If common ground has not been found, the organisation clearly does not have a viable basis for functioning. Again, a majority position must be arrived at, and individuals decide whether they are prepared to work within the organisation's agreed values.

Where some people *miss out*, it is important to recognise that the process of resolving values has not created organisational division ... it has simply identified critical problems that were already in existence, and provided an opportunity to deal with them in a proactive manner.

Having identified all your key common ground, and processed any differences, you should now have *an onion* ... a coherent set of organisational values. You can expect your organisation to function with greater consistency, efficiency and effectiveness in the future!

Examples: Values with Potential Impact on Organisational Functioning

Deep Values (Closely Related to Key Ideological Questions)	Thematic Values (More Specific - there might be 20 of these for each <i>Deep Value</i>)	Behavioural Values (Very Specific - there might be 200 of these for every <i>Deep Value</i>) Example values²:
Individuals are responsible for their own actions.	It is important that society has clear standards and laws.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Breaking the law should be equally penalised, regardless of the circumstances. ▪ There is no place for supportive services in society. ▪ The main role of parents is to teach their children to obey.
The role of society is to ensure that everyone has opportunities in life.	Socially disadvantaged people are entitled to extra support from society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It's not OK to be rude to people in wheelchairs. ▪ Positive discrimination is essential to achieving equality.
Human beings are interdependent.	The main role of government is to ensure that all citizens have access to community life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All participants in this committee should turn up on time. ▪ Government should fund a mentor for all young people who don't have one in their everyday life.
Human beings need clear values to have meaning in life.	Human beings with power over others have a moral responsibility to know what their values are, and how these might impact on their decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advocates should name the values they are working from with their clients. ▪ Community services workers (who profit from people's vulnerabilities) have a particular responsibility to explore their values and their possible impact.
All life has equal, intrinsic value.	Everyone's time is of equal value.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It's not OK to waste other people's time. ▪ There should be a <i>universal wage</i> for every person in society, regardless of their occupation.

² Note that *Behavioural Values* can be quite superficial. This does not diminish their importance in an organisational setting - these can be heartfelt values, and the people who hold them may not distinguish them according to 'depth'.