

# Values are More Important than Ever In Times of Crisis



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## Good Judgment In Difficult Times

Unprecedented changes, crisis management, and an uncertain future shaped world in the first quarter of 2020. Many leaders had to make decisions beyond their comfort zones without the luxury of using deep reflection, data-gathering, and input while feeling like they were resting precariously on shifting sand. This flexibility and nimbleness, though, are an expectation when leading through a crisis.

Is there a true north to guide our navigation in the face of uncertainty? The answer is yes, and it resides in our personal core values and the established organizational (team) values. Leaders make decisions based on their personal core values every day, whether they realize it or not. However, stressful times and urgency often hijack our clarity. As leaders, it is important to breathe and remember we have been making important decisions, big and small, using our core values to guide us all along.

Well-defined team values shape cultures and direct how the team pursues its priorities. Values also dictate which behaviors are reinforced and which ones are unacceptable. This cultural framework is the foundation for accountability. While accountability is always important, it is even more critical during a time of crisis or major change. It is, after all, when we are under pressure that we show the world our true colors. That is as valid for the leader as it is for the team.

## Challenges leaders may encounter

**“It’s not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are.”**

- Roy Disney

Let’s face it, when we are fighting ambiguity and uncertainty, maintaining our three missions of teaching, research, and service, it may be tempting to relegate trust, transparency, collegiality, respect, and teamwork to the backseat. When we are in survival mode and the “fight or flight” response takes over, leaders tend to focus more on the foreground of operational business decisions. Their field of vision becomes restricted – often creating a false sense of “control.” Instead, leaders need to intentionally pull back, open their mental aperture, and take in the mid-ground and background.



When our instincts are telling us to “hunker” down, it takes courage to broaden our view and, instead, pay attention to the soft skills living within a workplace culture that promote how teams work together cohesively. The best cultures derive from the individual actions people take when using the values as their compass in making important decisions. Leaders who effectively lead through a crisis pay attention to both: clarity about reaching goals and intentional focus on using values to strengthen team culture.

## Strategies to keep values front and center

**“A courageous culture connects its values to specific behaviors, so people know what is expected, encouraged, and rewarded within their team and organization. In addition to setting clear expectations, the process gives organizations shared language and a well-defined culture...Operationalized values also drive productive decision making. When values aren’t clear, we can easily become paralyzed—or, just as dangerous, we become too impulsive. Operationalized values drive what I think of as the sweet spot of decision making: thoughtful and decisive.”**

- Brené Brown

- **Hold a Values Discussion**

It's best to have values discussions and firmly embedded norms when the environment is not charged but if you and your team haven't discussed values yet, use this moment of change to begin the dialogue. Workplace cultures, whether co-located, virtual or hybrid, thrive when they have a shared language and a mutual purpose. Provide strong context for introducing the topic and the importance of shared values for the team. Ask members to reflect on their own personal values and share 3 that are most important. Then, engage the team in an interactive discussion to combine individual top values and identify the 5 that are common to the full team. Invite comments and foster conversation on why the values matter to your work. This will promote engagement and buy-in.

Then, focus the conversation on how the team can operationalize the top five commonly held values by describing behaviors that demonstrate the value when team members are interacting with each other or with customers. Be careful to avoid defining the value. It is more helpful to think through the observable actions, behaviors, or commitments that demonstrate how the value is being lived.

- **Create or reevaluate team norms**

Ask team members to articulate the norms that will be expected of everyone and establish their team community agreement. Revisit these regularly by asking: are we walking our talk? Do our intentions, words, and behaviors align with our values. If they don't, it's time to revisit the values and norms. And, when a crisis arises, ask: are the team norms we currently use to guide our interactions helpful for our current reality? If not, which ones do we need to adjust or add?

- **Embed and reinforce values in communications**

Communicate directly and frequently about the importance of team values and acknowledge when you see them being demonstrated. This can be done during team meetings, through newsletters or even quick instant message team communications. For example, *“Joanna handled a very difficult situation with a faculty member with grace and respect. #CustomersFirst!”*

Values are a testament to our true selves because they show what matters most to us. It is affirming and empowering to have others see us living out our values. It reinforces how our values influence those voices in our heads telling us to live in integrity with our beliefs.

# Final Thoughts

**“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in the moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”**

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Leaders who are transparent about making value-based decisions bring teams together. During times of crisis, this approach may seem like a luxury, but it could very well be the one that shows leadership excellence, holds the team together and keeps everyone operating effectively.

Values have the power to help teams become stronger and more unified than ever before, even, or perhaps, especially, in times of crisis. The decisions leaders make and the actions they take when in the challenge of change and uncertainty create experiences for all employees. Those experiences will shape their beliefs and the beliefs formed from these crucible experiences will drive individual behaviors and actions going forward.

In times of crisis, we need to come together and set the standard for values-driven judgments. These times will be remembered for a myriad of reasons – let one of them be for how we collectively chose to behave in ways that resulted in connectedness, forward movement, strength, and resilience.

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