

Understanding Your Values

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published on BNET.com 2/01/2007

During your working life, it is easy to get so immersed in your day-to-day routine that you forget to look at the larger picture—your life as a whole. You might be very excited to have been offered a new job; you might simply feel grateful that you *have* a job with a regular paycheck; or you might be immensely relieved to have survived the latest round of layoffs. Any of these situations can make you forget to ask yourself the really important question, "Am I in the right job *for me*?"

The answer might be simple—you enjoy what you do and feel happy and comfortable at work and with your coworkers. But the answer can be more difficult—you may feel vaguely dissatisfied and restless; you may have changed jobs a great many times during your career; perhaps you notice that you start a new job with high enthusiasm, only to lose interest or motivation fairly quickly.

These scenarios may be the result of a mismatch between your values and your circumstances, so it makes good sense to identify and take an analytical look at your values and the way in which you can apply them practically to your working life. This checklist points the way.

What You Need To Know

What are values, exactly?

Values are about worth: they are the things you hold dear—the guiding principles, standards, and beliefs you are committed to and live your life by—and when they are compromised, you feel unhappy and dissatisfied.

It is worth remembering, however, that values are not set in stone. Some may remain the same throughout your life; others may change through maturity, or as the result of particular experiences or circumstances.

Why is it important to my job to understand my values?

You need to understand your values, because it is they that motivate you to work. You can think of your career as a journey and your interests, abilities, and values as three key elements in that journey. Your interests tell you what direction to go, your abilities indicate how long it will take to reach your goal, and your values dictate whether or not the journey is worth taking in the first place. If, consciously or unconsciously, your values tell you that a particular direction is not the right one, your journey is unlikely to end in success!

What is the difference between values and ethics?

In the context of a job, values differ from ethics in that there is not necessarily a moral dimension to values. Values, unlike ethics, do not have to be seen by society as "right" or "just" or "responsible" and so on ... they simply need to be right for *you* . So one of your important values might be "a short commute to work," for example—which has no moral implications whatever. If we take this thought to its logical extreme, then, even if an organization prides itself on its ethical standards or working practices, it *still* may not be the right place for you—unless, of course, an organization's ethical standards rate higher on your list of wants than does the short commute.

What To Do

Assess What Is Important To You

It works well to take a structured approach to this assessment, because it prevents confusion and makes it easy to remember ideas. A good method is to create a values "scorecard," to help you identify and prioritize what you consider important.

Think carefully about what each of the words or terms below means to you, and then assess how they relate to what you want from work:

- Achievement (accomplishing important things)
- Aesthetics (attractive workspace)
- Affiliation (membership in organization as a source of pride)
- Alignment with boss
- Artistic creativity
- Autonomy & independence (most work self-determined, with limited direction from others)
- Change & variety
- Chaos (loosely defined environment; goals and priorities unclear)
- Community activity
- Commute
- Competition
- Creativity
- Dual careers (place also offers career opportunities for partner)
- Employee benefits
- Excitement
- Fast pace

- Friendships
- Glass ceiling (work environment offers all groups equal potential to work at highest levels)
- Global focus (potential to live/work abroad)
- Help others
- Impact society
- Influence people
- Intellectual status
- Knowledge
- Legacy (be remembered for specific achievement by those who follow after)
- Lifestyle integration (ability to balance family, career, and self-fulfillment)
- Location
- Loyalty (high level of reciprocal loyalty with organization)
- Make decisions
- Minimize stress
- Mobility (opportunity to relocate when appropriate)
- Moral affiliation (work with people of similar morals, values, and ethics)
- Moral fulfillment (environment that reflects your own moral standards)
- Multicultural affiliation (environment with people from broad range of ages, cultures, etc.)
- Physical challenge
- Power & authority
- Precision work
- Prestige
- Profit & gain
- Public contact
- Pure challenge (work which requires you to overcome impossible obstacles, difficult problems, etc.)
- Recognition
- Risk
- Security
- Self-realization (potential for you to realize your best talents)
- Stability
- Supervision (you have responsibility for planning and managing work done by others)
- Time freedom

- Travel
- Work alone
- Work under pressure
- Work with others

Once you have pondered the meaning of each, list the words or phrases under the following headings—bearing in mind that you may change your opinion several times as you go through them.

Must haves	High Wants	Wants	Don't Minds	Don't Wants
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Check Your Values Against Your Current Work

Now check your list of wants and don't wants against your present job. Are your most important requirements being met? If not,

- what can you do to change the situation?
- who might be able to help you—your boss, department head, mentor, HR department?
- could you apply for a different role within the organization to gain you more prestige or a higher salary?
- could you work flextime to make it easier to fit around family commitments?
- could you move nearer to work to cut down on commuting?
- could you spend more time socializing with colleagues to build friendships?
- would a training course increase your knowledge or give you more intellectual challenge?

These are examples of the types of options which might be open to you, depending on your values. Many require only small adjustments in your working conditions and could make the difference between your being happy or unhappy in your job.

Recognize When Change is Impossible

Sometimes, however hard you try to change things, you have to face the fact that the differences between your own values and those of your employer are irreconcilable. In fact, one of the top ten reasons people give for leaving their jobs is that their values are at odds with the corporate culture. If this is true in your own case, the most sensible option is to start looking for another job that will suit you better—not only destroys your attitude at work, making it difficult to regain your confidence and enthusiasm, but also affects your relationships and life outside the workplace.

What To Avoid

You ignore your instincts

Most of us want to be responsible and do what is "right." We have an innate fear of rocking the boat and tend to feel guilty if we cause disruption and blame ourselves if we are unhappy—"I shouldn't make a fuss," "I'm being silly," "I really must learn to apply myself" being common sentiments. However, if you feel dissatisfied at work, or are job-hunting and want to make the right decision, it is time to put yourself and your priorities first. Make sure your values are being satisfied, or you will never produce anything inspiring in terms of performance—which is hardly in your employer's best interests either!

You see little things as more important than they need to be

Having realized the importance of your own values, you do need to exercise judgment in deciding which are essential to you. Nothing is perfect, and, even in the best of circumstances, you will encounter situations that require compromise. Say, for example, your wing of the building is being remodeled and you lose your window office. You really want a window office, but all are already occupied and you would have to dislodge a colleague to get one. You could ask to be considered for one if it should become available, but a window office is probably not worth going to the wall for. Prioritizing your values into essentials and nice-to-haves is useful, as it helps you decide just how hard you need to push in different situations.

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