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Coupling Actions with Values

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Coupling Actions with Values

— Kevin D. Frick, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Values-based leadership is distinctive because practitioners use consistently held values to *intentionally* guide their decisions and actions. Drawing on Smith and Schwartz (1997), values can be interpreted as beliefs about “desirable goals” and “models of conduct that promote those goals” that facilitate the choice of behaviors and can be ranked in importance. For these to be unfailing guideposts, leaders must have invested time to discern and reflect on their values. While the popular press reports that Americans vary on a common delineation of values (e.g., Luntz, 2018), it is unclear whether most Americans have explored the origins and meanings of their own values sufficiently to understand which resonate most and to what degree to implement. Almost three years ago, I had not taken time to carefully identify and analyze my own values. The difference the process of discernment and reflection since then has made in my leadership and life is tangible.

In 2015, I was working with a coach whose mantra is expressed in her book’s title, *Provoking Greatness* (Burmeister, 2015). In conversation about my leadership roles and abilities, she asked me to describe what made me get up, come to work, and put in my best effort daily. I gave multiple responses; each focused on my title or job description at the time. She gently interrupted each time, encouraging me to answer with an intrinsic motivation rather than what my supervisor or employer wanted. Much to my surprise, I could not.

The coach also told me that if I were just to lead “as my authentic self,” those around me would likely be willing followers. I had some sense of what “leading as my authentic self” meant (having experienced 45 years of “self”); however, looking back, without having done the work to identify my values and evaluate whether I used them as intentional guideposts for actions, decisions, and leadership on a daily basis, I truly could not even say what “my self” in leadership looked like.

Concurrently, I was interacting with another local coach and (now) author. Her book, *Permission to be Human* (Hyland 2021), focuses on relentlessly living out values while allowing room for slipping and growing as we all realize the challenges and pitfalls of being human. She runs a number of workshops for the public. One comprises a single session that prompts participants to identify their values and consider the history of how they have aligned or failed to align with their actions, allowing for some focus on the future. The second comprises multiple sessions in a small cohort format in which participants grapple deeply with a future-oriented vision of how to more closely synchronize their actions and values.

I participated in the single-session workshop in 2019 and came away with a new, much deeper understanding of my values and associated intrinsic motivations. Prior to the first workshop, I would have listed values that are generally viewed as good and non-controversial such as honesty, integrity, and punctuality. I had never seen an instrument with dozens of

words from which to choose to name my values (Harris, 2010; Hyland, 2021). This exercise produced two revelatory events which began not just a personal evolution, but a transformation into a practitioner of values-based leadership. First, my eyes were opened to the depth and precision of words used to describe values and to highlight the importance of contextual interpretation of what the words meant to different people. Second, the list, context, and activities of the workshop gave me space to think about and reflect with help from others to ascertain my primary resonant values. I identified connection, empathy, authenticity, reflection, and creativity. I later added perseverance, although that made my list of primary values long.

While these values resonated with my sense of self, I also needed the “permission to be human” – as the book directs – as I was not perfect in living them out and, sometimes, they got in the way. One direct report had called me her most empathetic supervisor who could not make a decision. As mentioned, one coach had told me to be the authentic self that I could not even recognize at the time. I used creativity to write poems to honor a number of mentees but was rarely more than reactive in my own job. I reflected before giving almost any answer to any question, but that made me one of the last to respond in many group settings, which I considered a disadvantage. I knew that first and foremost, despite being a self-labeled and Myers-Briggs introvert, I thrived on my nurtured and curated connections, yet I was never the most talkative in a group. That first one-session workshop set me on a path to use my values as a more unfailing guide for my actions.

In January 2020, the pandemic began, and, by mid-March 2020, we were working from home and socially distanced. Being away from the office for many months gave me more time to think while exercising, more poetry writing, and more careful reflection on my values and alignment with actions. I turned an occasional practice into a daily one, posting an expression and reflection as a #whiteboardmoment on social media. The hashtag came from the first several having been based on photos of expressions written on my office whiteboard. Each was authentic and creative and intended to build connection, reflecting three core values.

The volume of my poetry increased generally as well as specifically with respect to poems honoring those I mentor. Around Father’s Day of 2020, I wrote a poem for my three sons and others for whom I have been a father figure. The poem had the simple, seventeen-syllable structure of a haiku. Upon completion, I realized I had discerned my intrinsic motivation for working hard every day. Here is the poem:

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While it was written as a parent, I realized I could link this to my activities broadly. Research about efficiency in health care provision could light paths to choose hope for patients and populations. Helping students complete capstones or dissertations or make it through programs was a way to light paths for them to choose hope. My leadership – with a focus on

culture building, driving toward consensus when possible, caring about team members' professional development opportunities, and being customer focused — was lighting paths for diverse stakeholders to choose hope.

As the year continued, I had the opportunity to retake the workshop focused on identifying values and was encouraged to use the lens of “how can this help me figure out my next career step?” I was focused on increasing opportunities to share my values through mentoring and helping individuals rather than discussing policies about things like masks that seemed perpetual at that time. Building on growth from the one-session workshop, I participated in the six-week workshop in early 2021. I felt empowered to speak with my supervisor about succession planning. Eight months later, I have been given the opportunity to step away from my administrative role and take a sabbatical, during which I plan to focus on using my values as a lens through which to consider future leadership opportunities and as a lens through which to present ideas about leadership in the context of mentoring.

The key was to begin with effort to discern and reflect on my values and continue to seek answers that I know are in my core about how they align with my intrinsic motivation and resulting actions. This is like the idea of sculpting being a process of revealing what is already in the stone, a quote often attributed to Michelangelo, albeit without evidence (Quote Investigator, 2021).

Now, as leadership and research opportunities arise, I evaluate each more deliberately than I did prior to my last career trajectory change, because values-based leadership occurs by more than commission. Sometimes omission is required; the only way to fully commit is to omit things that are, at best, tangentially related to my primary intrinsic motivation — no matter how intellectually stimulating they may be. My value-based leadership leads me to ask: Is this new path going to facilitate my showing empathy, allow me time to reflect in conversation, provide opportunities to continue to build a network of ever-stronger connections, and allow me and others to be creative and authentic in each other's presence? I look at my June 2020 poem and ask, “Is this new opportunity going to help me shine a more illuminating light, reveal more paths, or inspire more hope? Is this new opportunity going to allow me to do it with as little conditional expectation as possible?” If the answers to any of the value-driven and primary intrinsic motivation-driven questions are “no,” then I must ponder whether there is any way to modify the opportunity to align more fully with my values. If not, I will let it go, so I can maximize my contribution with the limited time and the limited resources I have.

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About the Author

Kevin Frick, PhD, is a health economist and professor at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, where he has been for more than eight years. He began his career at Johns Hopkins in 1996 in the Bloomberg School of Public Health before switching schools to become the Vice Dean of Education at Carey. He has recently returned to a faculty to focus on teaching and mentoring students as well as returning to research on cost-effectiveness and entering the space of research on mentoring, leadership, and values.

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