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From Values to Performance: Theory, Practice and Implications

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Throughout all aspects of society, there appears to be an ever increasing amount of attention given to the topic of values. From discussions of family values, to a political candidate's values, and even the importance of an organization's or a society's values, there appears to be a growing acceptance of the belief that values make a difference in the way people behave. Some researchers suggest the cognitive choices people make are a reflection of the things they value (e.g., McClelland, 1985). Others contend that values provide the motivation for the choices that people make and the actions that people take (e.g., Locke, 1991). Values are a particularly important aspect of ethics, which involve the evaluation of and enactment of values (Gini, 1996), by guiding an individual's determination of what are ethically appropriate and inappropriate decisions and actions. While there is arguably a close relationship between values and behavior, the relationship between values (or ethics) and performance is much more obscure. The latter relationship involves a complex set of factors as the values of multiple constituents (e.g., personal, co-worker, leader, organizational, societal) all influence behavior in some way, and the determination of performance standards likely changes with each of these constituents. For example, whose values, and what values should be related to performance? How can organizations ensure members share a set of "core" values? And what role do leaders play in establishing a link between values, ethics, and performance?

To begin the process of identifying and addressing these issues, we presented a panel discussion at the 2001 ILA conference in which an eclectic group of academics and practitioners discussed their views on values and ethics, their relationship to work

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performance, and the role of leadership in establishing and maintaining this alignment. Participants in the session included Scot Bemis and Greg Dardis of the United States Military Academy, both of whom have expertise in the implementation of values-based, ethical climates, and the development of both leaders and non-leaders throughout their work with the U.S. Army; Marcus Dickson of Wayne State University, whose research and consulting endeavors focus on the development and impact of values-based leadership and organizational climates related to ethical behavior; and Brent Smith of Rice University, whose research and consulting efforts focus on the identification, development, and impact of personal values, and the development and impact of organizational climates related to ethics.

We have prepared this paper to further efforts toward an understanding of relationship between values, ethics, and performance, and provide a summary of the different ideas and issues raised during the session. We chose four of the main topics discussed during the session, and each of the panelists summarized their perspectives on that topic. We conclude with a general discussion of the implications for theory, research, and practice.

Discussion from the Panelists

What are "values?"

Bemis: Values are those core beliefs that guide the way people behave. From the types of decisions that people make, to activities that people become involved with, people make choices that are consistent with the things they value. We can think of values as both preferred ways of acting, such as courage or integrity, or desired results of our actions, such as stability and security, which guide the choices that we make.

We can talk about the values of an organization in much the same way. Here, values refer to preferred or desired ways of doing business that create expectations for members to behave a certain way. An organization can define its mission, vision, and values, and place them on plaques scattered through its building, but unless its members embrace or at least accept the these values, they will have no bearing on the way business is conducted. Ultimately, an organization's values must be understood, accepted, expected, and reinforced to truly exist.

Dickson: I think the easiest way to explain "values" is to talk about what it means for something to be valued. Things that are valued are the things people want to get and keep. This can be something tangible, like an object or a home or a job; or something intangible, which is where most of the action in values is. Intangible things that can be valued might include relationships, social status, power, particular self-images, or any number of other things that people want to get and/or keep.

It's important to remember that people value hierarchies. What I mean by that is that two people might both value time with family-if given the choice of having time with family or not having time with family, both would choose to have that time. But the choices we face in life are usually not "to have this or not to have this" -instead, they are "to have this or to have something else instead." So even though two people might both value time with family, if push comes to shove, one might choose to spend time on her/his career at the expense of time with family. In other words, just knowing what someone values isn't enough-it's important to also know how important that value is relative to other possible choices.

We usually learn what our real values are when the things we value are threatened in some way. So, for example, most Americans would say that they value their privacy. But in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks, some Americans are saying that they are willing to give

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up some of their privacy in order to have more security-and security is probably not even a value that most people thought much about prior to those attacks.

To move into the work context, we can talk about values that people bring to work when they arrive, which might include things like equity, or being rewarded in line with our contributions, and quality, or the desire to produce and deliver goods and services that are the best they can be. There are also values that might be unique to a workplace, like Ben & Jerry's focus on social activism, or Nordstrom's focus on delivering excellent customer service.

Smith: I think of values as core characteristics of people, as well as organizations. For people, this might include "valuing" economic and financial pursuits, helping others, or a preference for being a part of groups and affiliating with others. People tend to make choices that are consistent with the things that they value. For organizations, values might represent a preference for structured and formal divisions of work and channels of communication, or a commitment to integrity of interactions with others. Here values connote expectations of behavior, and are reflected in the values that are shared among members. Stronger organizational climates and cultures have a higher degree of shared perceptions, expectations, and values, and form a sort of social glue that binds people together, and sets one organization apart from another organization.

When we talk about ethics in organizations, we have to understand the core values of the organization are predicated on the shared values of the individuals who populate the organization. Organizational ethics are rooted in these values and play a prominent role in the development and maintenance of inter-organizational relationships.

What is the relationship between values and work performance?

Bemis: I would expect that clearly stated and understood organizational values would be a good predictor of performance. Both leaders and non-leaders are constantly forced to make decisions, and values are a critical part of the decision-making process. Many of the choices people make are surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity, especially in the military. Clearly stated values create an expectation, which helps to reduce the ambiguity and uncertainty. Members can devote more time to directly addressing the issue, and less time to determining an ethically appropriate approach. This should also increase the consistency of decision-making throughout the organization.

While organizations often tout many values in the beginning, or publicly, it is only those values that have shown to be instrumental in the organization's success that ultimately end up being reinforced and accepted as underlying values. Unless the members understand the relevance of the values, or the impact on organizational success, they are unlikely to internalize the values.

Dardis: Simply having values is not enough. One must act in accordance with those values. A leader of character does this. If we have an organization "full" of such leaders (we are all leaders) and if all members adhere to a common values set we expect that performance will improve in all respects. Our stakeholders expect us to do this. In some cases the law (e.g., FCC, SEC) require values-based behaviors.

Values guide performance and performance must be measured against values. GE does this. It's just as important to meet your productivity goals as it is to be a values-based person. We need to ensure we explain if we are distinguishing values or values-based organizations. Is there a difference? What is a values-based organization (an organization full of people with

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values? No, that's circular). A values-based organization holds people accountable-the Army does, GE does, but many perhaps don't.

Dickson: I think we expect values to be related to performance because when we value something, we want to get it and/or keep it. The way we generally acquire things, and the way we are able to keep things (whether tangible or intangible), is generally through our performance of one some sort. So if we want to buy something we can't afford, we work hard to earn the money to buy it. If we want to acquire or keep the respect of our colleagues, we generally have to earn it through our performance. So we expect values to be related to performance because performance is how we are able to get and keep the things we value.

This can be positive or negative. On the one hand, people's values may lead them to strive for better and better performance, to engage in citizenship behaviors, or to stick with a company for the long haul. On the other hand, when an organization's practices conflict with an individual's personal values, the consequences can be negative. For example, when people value equity and want to know that their contributions to the organization are being rewarded equitably compared to those of their colleagues, but work in a setting where there are little difference in the pay raises that people receive, they may view their treatment as unfair. According to equity theory, when people feel a lack of equity they may act to restore equity by reducing inputs such as performance. So values can lead to enhanced performance, or they can lead to eroded and reduced performance. So just saying that values are related to performance is probably not enough-we need to know what values, and how they are related to performance.

Smith: Values are a stimulus. When faced with alternatives, people are disposed to pursue that which is preferred or valued. Shared values provide a stimulus that is consistent across people in an organization, and should help to motivate people to act in similar ways toward achieving performance outcomes. In settings where work responsibilities and behaviors are fairly proscribed, shared values are probably less important for achieving performance outcomes. But in dynamic organizational settings, where things change continuously, shared values will help to achieve consistency in the absence of formal or stable standards.

However, much of my research focuses on the dangers of having too much similarity in an organization. Shared values will certainly help to build cohesion and consistency, but there is a risk of becoming insular and rigid. A balance between similarity and diversity of values is an important issue to consider.

What are some implications of "pulling" values from members using the recruiting and hiring process, versus "pushing" values on members using training and socialization processes?

Bemis: The more important issue here is that new members "catch" the organization's values early on. Since we're talking about an organization's values, training is an especially important factor for getting individuals to adopt the organization's beliefs and creating a sense of shared values and expectations. From day one, new members should be introduced to the organization's core values, and provided training activities that demonstrate the importance of these values and how they should be enacted. Early on, new organizational members will look to older/senior members and emulate demonstrated behaviors as they seek to learn the norms and to become accepted. For this reason, it is important that leaders "walk the talk." As the training continues, and the new members see why the values are important to organizational success, they will internalize the values to the degree they identify with the organization. This will help to create shared expectations about their importance.

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This is an easier task if an individual's personal values are similar to the values of the organization. As an organization's culture and values system strengthens, and the organization itself becomes successful (by whatever measure they use), members will begin to self-select as they are attracted to the success and shared values. But, as long as the individual clearly understands the organization's values and their importance training can be an effective approach. However, if someone's personal values contradict or are in direct opposition to the organization's values its unlikely that any amount of training will gain the individual's acceptance and change behavior. In this event, the individual will most likely deselect from the organization.

Dardis: It takes both to be sure. For many companies, it's easier to hire (attract/select) people who already share your values. But then, that assumes your selection process is sound and for many companies who can't afford expensive teams of psychologists that's tough-besides, people may lie to get a job. As for pushing, there are inherent problems as well as many times Human Resources teaches values in boring training sessions and workers soon realize that "we don't walk the walk" around here. But we must do both-the Army does and many others do likewise. Socialization is key. Once again, many organizations don't even think about it-new workers complete their obligatory sessions with the HR people, read (supposedly) the company notebooks (to include a page on "our values system") and values are never discussed again (except for the occasional speech by the CEO or around the coffee cup). Does your company have a socialization program? Who conducts it? How do you educate (more than train) values? How do you reward or punish values-based behaviors?

All behavior is based on values-it's usually a case of "values colliding". How do we help our workers negotiate these inherent values collisions? The Army does a pretty good job I think-we socialize new employees, we do push values to be sure, but our appraisal systems do include mention of our values system, and most of our people can define our values. Perhaps we can say our organization has a common values system that people understand and believe in. Theoretically, performance is then based on values. Does that necessarily equate to better performance? Perhaps not in the short-term, but in the long-term it ensures the future of the organization. In an different sense, the "new" work force is drawn to values-based organizations. If nothing else, an adherence to values can assist an organization's efforts to attract new members.

Dickson: There are a couple of ways for top managers to get an organization where people have the values the managers want them to have. One is to hire people with those values, and the other is to instill those values in people. With all the talk about transformational leadership and planned culture change and such, one might think that instilling values is no big deal-and one would be wrong. People are generally resistant to explicit attempts to change their values. The funny thing is that their values often DO change in the desired direction, over time, if the company is showing that those values "work".

One thing to remember is that people in organizations may already have pretty similar values, because people with certain characteristics go into certain professions, and then people are attracted to specific organizations (and the organizations are attracted to specific people) because of the perception that they will "fit" or share similar values (Schneider, 1987 tells us this). So leaders who are trying to shape values may not have that far to go, PROVIDED that they've paid attention to those values when they were hiring in the first place.

Smith: Both hiring and training are important. Hiring individuals with personal values that are consistent with things an organization values will help to ease the transition process for both parties. Again, there are risks in creating a purely similar workforce. Organizations can use the

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hiring process to bring in new members who have diverse characteristics. Then, use the training process to develop a sharing of a few beliefs and practices that the organization holds as core values.

How can leaders enact the organization's values in members as they guide them toward performance objectives and outcomes?

Bemis: Probably the two most important things that leaders can do are practice what they preach and hold people accountable for their actions. When faced with an unfamiliar environment, supervisors are the first place the subordinates will look to try to figure out how to handle the situation. If the leader takes a win-at-any-cost approach, that type of behavior is likely to be viewed by others as appropriate and expected. On the other hand, if the leader's actions demonstrate the accomplishment of goals and objectives within the expected ethical standards, that behavior will likely be emulated.

Just as important, leaders also need to hold people accountable for their actions. Making decisions that embody the organization's values should be recognized and rewarded for others to see. Decisions that show a disregard for the organization's values should be addressed, regardless of outcome of the action.

Dardis: Elementary Leadership 101-leaders have to first understand the values themselves and then demonstrate them via their daily actions. We call it walking the talk. People have to be held accountable for their actions and leaders must ensure that they refer to the values set when they correct an employee's actions (e.g., "your performance failed to achieve the standard. Which of our values was not evident by your actions?") Educate, role model, reinforce, gain compliance, then seek internalization.

Dickson: It seems to me that you've got to go back to the concept of values hierarchies and apply it to organizations. Organizations often claim to value certain things (through mission statements, values statements, and other public proclamations), but then appear to abandon those values when something else they value is threatened (usually, short-term profits). The employees are then left wondering what the organization truly values and believes in.

So organizational leaders need to be absolutely sure that employees see the organization and its leaders acting in ways congruent with the values that the organization claims to possess. Otherwise, employees are likely to become cynical about any values-based communications or motivation/leadership efforts that the organization engages in. My colleagues Brent Smith, Mike Grojean, Mark Ehrhart, and I have written about this in a recent Leadership Quarterly article (2001), where we write about the organizational climate regarding ethics. When the organization claims to value a certain set of ethical standards, but then abandons those standards in order to make a quick buck, the employees grow cynical, and also don't know what they're expected to do. But when the climate regarding ethics is strong-when employees see the company and its leaders acting in the way it says it will, and when employees know what is expected of them ethically-then there are some important outcomes for the organization, including increased morale and cohesion, and these have been shown to lead to increased performance. So this is another route by which values are related to performance.

For leaders to pull this off, they have to understand the organization's true values, and recognize when decisions they make relate to the values. One of the biggest problems I see is that top management often makes business decisions without considering how these will be perceived by the employees, and whether those decisions will be congruent with the organization's core values and ethics.

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Smith: For leaders, I think the process begins with an awareness of personal values and how they are consistent or different than the core values of the organization. The leader's values will be reflected in their behavior. Leaders that embody the organization's core values will serve as a role model for their subordinates. Coaching and feedback are then important activities to ensure that values and ethical standards are adhered to while focusing on performance outcomes. Coaching and feedback should address both the process and results.

General Discussion and Implications

The panelists drew upon diverse experiences working with these concepts, yet they expressed convergent ideas regarding the form and role of values. In a general sense, values seem to be desirable goals that cross situations, vary in importance, and serve as a guiding influence in a person's life. Schwartz (1994) provides four distinctly useful concepts that help to clarify the origin and purpose of values, and how they are aligned with behavior. These four definitional concepts provide a theoretical basis for integrating and understanding the underlying arguments of our panelists' discussions. First, values are cognitive structures which serve the interests of some social entity. Next, they can motivate action, particularly providing direction and emotional intensity to this action. Third, values function as standards for judgment and justifying action. Finally, values are acquired both through socialization into an organization or group and through the unique learning experiences of individuals.

Using these concepts as a backdrop, perhaps the single most significant implication is the acknowledgement that values matter to work performance. While our panelists discussed values at varying levels of analysis (from individual values to shared values as a cultural artifact), it is encouraging to note that the old stereotype of "it doesn't matter what you believe, only what you do" seems to be fading. Values are recognized as important determinants of behavior-and in many cases are actively developed or pursued for just such effects. Many of our current leadership-performance theories (e.g., servant leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership) suggest that performance driven by intrinsic motivation (i.e., values based) is preferable to that driven by a pure cost-benefit exchange.

However, an important question remains-that is, which values matter? Is it merely enough for an organization to formally state its values regardless of the content of those values? Or is it more likely that some values are more motivational than others? According to our panelists, both perspectives may have merit. Certainly, stated organizational values provide guidance and direction to its members by depicting desirable end-states and describing the "modus operandi" of the organization. Yet, certain values will be more important for the overall prosperity of the organization. It would be difficult to imagine a primary health care organization whose sole underlying value was making profit. Yet, if they didn't at least possess profit-making as one of their values, they would have difficulty remaining in existence. As example, Roy Vallegos of Merck Pharmaceuticals credits his company's development of a seemingly unprofitable cure for river blindness to an unswerving commitment to health care. His belief is that Merck can pursue profits for its shareholders and employees through such a commitment (Useem, 1998). Thus, it appears that values in general matter, but careful attention should be given to the behaviors and outcomes that these values are likely to encourage.

The next significant implication arises from the question of whether organizations should hire employees based on the values sets they possess, or attempt to develop these values sets after hire. These decisions may not be as distinct in practice as they are in concept. Our panelists note that attention to both is probably necessary. Training and socialization processes to gain members' understanding and acceptance of the organization's stated values. However, the building of a shared set of values likely and inadvertently begins with the hiring

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process. One of the panelists even uses Schneider's (1987) Attraction - Selection - Attrition model to suggest that even if an organization is not intentionally attracting applicants with specific value sets, that process will naturally occur. This fits very well with one of Schwartz's (1994) contentions that "values function as standards for judgment and justifying action." As potential applicants decide which organizations to join, they will naturally judge these organizations against their own value sets. Thus it would appear, that even if an organization is dedicated to socialization and the inculcation of specific values within its members (such as the military), it would be unwise to ignore the impact of the recruiting and hiring process.

The final implication we will discuss does not arise directly from our panelists' comments, but rather seems to underscore them in their entirety. To understand the role of values in work performance, it is critical to understand the nature and organization of values sets within individuals. Often, an assumption is made that individuals possess one set of values that are relevant across all situations and direct behavior. Yet how can we explain the inconsistency of a U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel, who by all accounts values honesty and integrity, but lies to the U.S. Congress? If values are indeed strong determinants of behavior, what is the explanation when specific instances of behavior are inconsistent with professed values? Thus, the manner in which people possess and organize values appears to be neither simple nor straightforward. Perhaps the organization of values is best explained by linking values to the self-concept, or more appropriately to multiple self-concepts.

Current thinking on self-concept holds that there are many possible selves (or role identities) that a person may possess. While a consensus on the nature of self-concept has yet to be reached, there appears to be three agreed upon points: (1) self-concept contains a stable aspect, (2) self-concept may change in differing situations, and (3) self-concept is closely linked to traits, values, and behavior (e.g., Donahue, 1994; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1987; Roberts & Donahue, 1994). Self-concept may be viewed as consisting of a hierarchy of separate context specific schema, with each containing beliefs about self in differing situations (Kihstrom et al., 1985; Leonard, Beauvais, & Scholl, 1999).

Individuals possess some sense of a stable self-concept that transcends situations. Leonard et al. (1999) have labeled this as the "global identity". This global identity may be the one that is drawn upon when individuals are asked to describe themselves without a relevant context specified. However, in relating values to work performance, it may be more useful to think of the multiple and differing possible self-concepts that individuals also possess. For example, an individual may be a teacher, a mother, a wife, a runner, and a Red Cross volunteer. This individual likely possesses a different self-concept or identity for each of these roles, and emphasizes different values depending on the role and situational context. While these different identities are probably related, they are still distinct. Each "role-specific" identity carries information about what are considered proper behaviors in a particular situation, what values are salient in that situation, and what attitudes are relevant for that particular situation (Leonard et al., 1999). While a global self-concept provides a starting point for role-specific identities, it is the role-specific identities that provide the relevant information that influence role behavior—that is, the values emphasized in a particular role will guide that person's decisions and actions in that role.

With this discussion in mind, the alignment of values and performance needs to consider the possibility that individuals hold multiple self-concepts with different value sets. It should not be anticipated that the values associated with one role will generalize across situations. This is especially important for individuals who may have multiple self-concepts as an employee of an organization, as is often the case for most leaders. For example, a project manager may have different role identities (and thus emphasize different values) while interacting with subordinates as opposed to customers. This notion of multiple value sets adds another layer of

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complexity and raises additional issues. For example, when designing a socialization program to inculcate values, should an organization intentionally reinforce values for a specific self-identity or role? Given the possibility of multiple role identities with different value sets, what must leaders attend to as they both demonstrate and reinforce organizational values to members? How can (or should) organizations develop leaders who demonstrate consistency of values across roles?

Preliminary Conclusions

There appears to be a clear agreement among panelists that values have important implications for the choices that people make, from the ways that people spend their time, to the places that people choose to work, to the ways that people view themselves. Simply put, values matter. However, in relating values to work performance, the perspective on what performance is must originate someplace, and typically this place is in the organization that someone works for. The relationship between values and performance now becomes multidimensional and much more complex. The organization's values, values held by co-workers and supervisors, and different values associated with different self-concepts all affect behavior in some way. These different values likely lead to different ethical standards, motivate different types of behavior, and ultimately lead to different outcomes. This presents a challenge to leaders attempting to build this relationship, as well as to researchers attempting to study this relationship. Perhaps this is a primary reason that a clear understanding of the relationship between values and performance remains elusive.

While we have discussed numerous issues and implications of a values-to-performance relationship, others are likely to exist. We encourage those who are interested in or work with this topic to raise those issues that will further the development of a values-to-ethics-to-performance conceptual model, researchers to design empirical investigations that tease apart and integrate these issues, and practitioners to consider the complexities and importance of values for their organizations.

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