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## Values-Based Leadership: The Foundation of Transformational Servant Leadership

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**Values-based  
Leadership:  
*The Foundation of  
Transformational  
Servant Leadership***



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## **Introduction**

The writers of this article contend that values-based leadership (VBL) is foundational to the practice of transformational servant leadership (TSL). VBL involves knowing one's core values, but it also necessitates an ongoing process of critiquing and shaping existing values or integrating new ones based on one's sense of life purpose, contextual factors, community affiliations, and/or the central texts that one embraces as moral compasses in life. The authors describe how leaders can engage in this practice and provide several case studies to demonstrate how this process might work itself out in business, education, healthcare, and Christian ministry.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the significance and critical necessity for values-based leadership (VBL) as the foundation for transformational servant leadership (TSL). TSL requires a strong orientation to values that allows leaders to serve their people well

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while engaging in efforts that transform the organization. In the first section, we provide a brief literature review on the various definitions of, and perspectives on, VBL and propose a definition of VBL. The second section focuses on how we might discern, critique, live out and develop personal values in ways that contribute to a robust form of TSL. The final section introduces case studies in four fields: business, Christian ministry/non-profit, education and health.

## Definitions

In order to understand VBL, it is important that we first define what we mean by values. Then, we can move on to explore the nature of VBL.

### Values

Rokeach, a major contributor to the study of personal values, defined a personal value as an “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence” (1973, p.5). Wilson (2004) maintains that Rokeach’s psychological definition of personal values is the most frequently cited definition of human values. Rokeach believed that people have a finite number of values and an infinite number of attitudes that arise out of these values. McCarty and Shrum (2000) concur with Rokeach and assert that values serve as prototypes for subsequent behaviors and attitudes.

Lopper, author and personal life coach, believes “values are deeply held beliefs about what is good, right, and appropriate” (2006, ¶1). He contends that they are deep-seated and remain constant over time. Lopper asserts that we accumulate our values from childhood based on teachings and observations of our parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other influential and powerful people. In fact, we would contend that our involvement in various communities throughout our lifespan not only contributes to the adoption of core values, but to their subsequent shaping.

Ganly states that “personal values are the essences of who we are as people and human beings” and as such, it is therefore “important to understand and recognize your own personal values” (2010, ¶2). Ganly believes that we develop our personal values throughout life and that they influence both our personal and work lives. Personal values impact work performance because they reflect who we are and how we act in any setting. The reason that personal values have such power is that they are foundational elements of character (BHO Group, 2009):

***Values are the fundamental building blocks of character that outline who we really are inside – what makes us unique. For the most part, values involve our interaction with people. They’re the internal rules that tell us how to treat ourselves and others (p.8).***

This definition is consistent with Rue’s (2001) understanding of personal values:

***Values are the essence of who we are as human beings. Our values get us out of bed every morning, help us select the work we do, the company we keep, the relationships we build, and, ultimately, the groups and organizations we lead. Our values influence every decision and move we make, even to the point of how we choose to make our decisions (p.1).***

Rue adds that our values are the elements deep within our belief system that make us “tick.” They influence every aspect of our perceived reality. Hyrum Smith from the Franklin-Covey Company refers to our belief system as the screen through which we filter our view of the everyday world (Smith, 2000).

Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) found five characteristics of values consistently reported in his review of the literature on values: Values are (1) beliefs, (2) relate to desirable end states of behavior, (3) guide evaluation of behaviors or events, (4) remain stable across time and context, and (5) are ordered by relative importance. He contends that values are learned beliefs that function as guiding principles regarding preferred ways of acting or being (Olver & Mooradian, 2003). These values are often intransient. Page claims, “You can train a person in the ways of the organization but you can seldom, and only with much work over a long period of time, really change a person’s values” (2009, p.144). Of course, individuals generally give themselves considerable latitude in the expression of their values with the result that they appear to have multiple identities. In reality, they are simply expressing diverse attitudes and behaviors in keeping with their values and their context, which may require certain values expressions. Yet, this view is problematic in at least two major ways. First, it assumes that individuals always align their attitudes and behaviors with their values. This position is untenable as there are personal factors such as mood and external factors like the expectations of others that might influence people to act contrary to their values. A second problem is that the view assumes that external factors influence the expression of values via attitudes and behaviors, but often lack the power to change the values themselves. This approach may allow for values change due to personal crises, but it does not allow for the gradual shaping of values. Graber and Osborne Kilpatrick (2008, p. 183) discovered in their study on establishing values-based leadership and values systems in healthcare organizations that “individual value systems, whatever they may be at the inception of professional education, are influenced and modified in the course of professional education.” Personal values may not be as intransient as Schwartz and others originally believed.

For the purpose of this paper, we assume that personal values are defining characteristics that tend to prevail over time, often have a determinative influence on our attitudes and actions, and can express themselves in many different ways. However, these expressions, as seen in attitudes and behaviors, may appear contradictory and may even reflect adherence to contradictory values (or values that oppose each other in certain situations). As people reprioritize their values, the resultant values’ expressions may differ significantly from previous expressions. We also acknowledge that even though core values tend to prevail over time, major life events, sustained values-shaping efforts on our part, and divine intervention can have a profound impact on our core values.

### ***Values-Based Leadership***

The literature on VBL tends to fall into two major categories: literature that focuses on understanding your core values and expressing them consistently, and literature that prescribes certain values as being necessary for effective values-based leadership. One’s definition of values-based leadership depends on how much you draw from each of these categories to formulate your definition.

### ***Understanding and Applying Personal Core Values***

Kraemer (2011), former CEO of Baxter, proposes four principles of VBL in his book, *From Values to Action*. He maintains that values-based leaders, first of all, understand their values through regular times of self-reflection. As Rue (2001, p.14) suggests, “It takes courage to face our authentic self and make the commitment to protect and care for that authentic self.” This process of self-reflection helps us to make the best choices for ourselves. Badaracco (1997), in his work on defining moments, believes that meaningful reflection is an important part of resolving defining moments well.

Yet, Kraemer (2011) also insists that values-based leaders go beyond self-reflection and are concerned about the values of others. It is unconscionable to apply our personal core values in the workplace without due consideration of the values of others. According to Kraemer, values-based leaders practice balance by listening to the ideas of others and discerning the personal values that undergird those ideas. They seek to pool the wisdom of others and try to make the best decision for those involved and the larger organization without compromising their personal values. This requires learning other peoples’ “languages” (Nash, 2002). Of course, leaders sometimes discover during this communal sense-making process that they need to allow others’ values to shape their own. The key to truly hearing people is open and transparent communication that allows people to get beneath ideas and share about their beliefs and defining moments that have shaped their ideas. Nash observes that when people in a group share openly at this level, they begin to construct meaning bridges within the group. These meaning bridges foster understanding and respect and can ultimately help the group work together to make wiser, more ethical decisions. It provides a context for values-based leaders to apply their personal core values in a respectful and equitable kind of way.

In addition to self-reflection and practicing balance, Kraemer (2011) believes that living out one’s personal values requires true confidence. This confidence grows, in part, as we understand our core values and increasingly align our actions with those values. Of course, this values-action alignment requires a strong commitment to our values and discipline in their application as we face threats and distractions. Yet, true confidence also allows leaders to listen to and incorporate the ideas of others (thus practicing balance). Confident leaders are often courageous leaders. Lee (2006) asserts that courage is the backbone of leadership – it helps us to activate our values.

Kraemer’s (2011) fourth principle of values-based leadership is genuine humility. He believes that genuine humility allows leaders to be authentic – to truly live out their personal values while respecting the values of those around them. “At the heart of genuine humility is never forgetting who you are, appreciating the value of each person in the organization, and treating everyone respectfully whether she is a senior manager or a summer intern” (Kraemer, p.60). True confidence helps us to demonstrate this kind of humility. As we recognize everyone’s value and believe that we are not more important than others, we are more likely to practice the principle of balance. In the end, humility allows values-based leaders to truly lead people – to bring their values to bear on others’ lives in an acceptable and meaningful way and to provide ways for other organizational members to do the same.

### ***Aspiring to Prescribed Core Values***

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Other authors advocate certain values as being superior to others. For example, Don Knauss (2007), Chairman and CEO of the Clorox Co., emphasizes five essential values for values-based leaders: integrity, curiosity, compassion, humility, and optimism. The Building Healthy Organizations Group (BHO, 2009) describe five areas where we form values that influence the health of workplace relationships: value (the extent to which we esteem peoples' inherent worth), aptitude (aligning tasks with peoples' abilities), learning (developing the whole person), unity (helping people function as a team), and empathy (caring for people). These areas reflect a servant leadership perspective. In fact, the BHO Group is convinced that "*anything other* than a servant leadership model has an inherent danger of devaluing people" (BHO, p.156). They conclude with a statement about the values that must undergird this process: "In healthy organizations, the commitment is to *respect, trust, and serve people*" (p.157). Based on the work of Robert Greenleaf, Spears (2010) articulated 10 characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Writing from a Christian perspective, Hill (2007) maintains that love, justice, and holiness are overarching values of God. Thus, Christians whom God calls to imitate Himself (Ephesians 5:1-2) should seek to emulate these values and others that reflect His character. The Bible provides much guidance as to the kinds of values Christians should embrace and how they might express them in God-honoring ways. We would add that wisdom is also an essential value, as wisdom helps us know how we might best shape, prioritize, and express our values. Holmes (1984), a noted Christian ethicist, narrows the list down to love and justice. Of course, if the greatest commandment in the Bible is to love God and others (Matthew 22:37-39), perhaps we could say that the ultimate value for Christian values-based leaders is love. Hester (2012) comes at the question from a different angle, but arrives at a similar conclusion. He appeals to a feminist ethic of care that lifts "care and compassion, love and genuine concern for others as a foundation of values-based leadership" (p.44).

### ***Combining the Two Approaches***

We would suggest that combining the two approaches results in a stronger VBL model. VBL certainly involves knowing our core values and exercising desirable ones appropriately and consistently in our leadership. Yet, one of the shortcomings of this approach is that it does not provide guidance on which values are desirable. We believe that VBL goes beyond self-awareness and application of existing values; it involves a critique of one's existing values in light of one's life purpose, contextual factors, community affiliations, and the central texts (e.g., the Bible) that one embraces as ultimate guides in life. Do I have the right values for helping me live out my life purpose? Are my values (and their expressions) appropriate for my context and the communities represented within that context? Are my values consistent with the central texts that serve as moral compasses in my life? If not, which values do I need to minimize and which values do I need to strengthen or add to my roster of core values? When faced with particular decisions, do I sometimes need to reprioritize my values? For the rest of this article, we define VBL as consistently leading out of personal values that are both desirable and beneficial for ourselves, those in our communities, and/or the organizations we serve. As a part of this definition, we recognize that VBL often requires transformational servant leaders to lead courageously when their personal values are

contrary to those of people around them. Yet, we also believe that leaders who desire to practice VBL must also be transformational servant leaders who are sensitive to their surrounding communities and who allow their values to shape and be shaped according to what would be most transformative for the organization and its members.

## A Description of Values-Based Leadership

Having established a definition of VBL, the next critical step is to describe how we discern, critique, live out, and develop personal values that benefit others, our organizations, and ourselves.

### *Discerning Our Personal Values*

Discerning our personal values involves self-reflection. What makes us act and react the way we do? Through what screens do we view and respond to life? On what basis do we make decisions? Questions, like those in the following list, can assist with the values discernment process:

1. *What is important to me?*
2. *What makes me feel fulfilled?*
3. *What make me feel angry or indignant?*
4. *What makes my life meaningful?*
5. *What makes me feel fulfilled and gets my adrenalin flowing?*
6. *What influences my decision-making process?*
7. *How do I like to be treated?*
8. *How do I treat others?*

We can also begin to clarify our values by creating a personal timeline of defining moments or seasons in our life. What are some of the pleasant and painful experiences that have shaped us? What are some of the themes that were reinforced across multiple defining moments? What are the underlying lessons that we learned (or perhaps should have learned) through those life-shaping events? As we look at the individual defining moments and some of the thematic connections between them, we will be in a better position to see how our life experiences have shaped our personal values.

Some examples of values are honesty, integrity, compassion, trust, forgiveness, accountability, change, excellence, justice, mercy, hospitality, generosity, humor, fun, loyalty, order, and cleanliness. Many personal development organizations have produced lists of personal values. It is often beneficial to look at these kinds of lists as certain value descriptors may resonate with our experiences. We can list dozens of relevant value descriptors, but generally the significant, or “core values,” that define us will not exceed six to eight in number.

Lee (2006) maintains that there are three levels of values: **low values** (common habits like productivity and a results orientation), **middle values** (best practices like teamwork and innovation) and **high values** (overarching values like integrity and courage). Values-based leaders must have high values that permeate all of their decisions and that result in positive benefits for themselves, their communities, and their organizations. Yet, they must also have strong middle and low core values that allow them to serve with excellence.

Understanding our personal values paves the way to making the best choices in keeping

with what is most important to us. Choosing to remain ignorant about our personal values puts us at a disadvantage, as we may make decisions that are out of alignment with what matters most to us. However, as we become more aware of our personal values, we may realize that they are inadequate to support the behaviors necessary to live out our sense of purpose within a particular context. Critiquing our core values is an important part of the process of developing robust personal values that will serve us and others well as we practice VBL.

### **Critiquing Our Personal Values**

Values-based leaders take the time to not only discern their personal values, but also to critique them to make sure they are both desirable and beneficial for themselves, their communities, and organizations they serve. Some may refer to this process as values alignment. In this kind of evaluative process, it is helpful to have an overarching sense of purpose for one's life. Do my current values help me achieve my life purpose? If they do not contribute in a substantive way, what values do I need to strengthen? One can also compare one's values with central texts that provide a moral compass for one's life. How do my values measure up to the values honored in those texts? It is also important to compare one's values to those in the communities that are important to us. In order to thrive and serve in transformational ways within those communities, do I need to adjust my values? As we critique our personal values, we are in a better position to live out values that are more beneficial to ourselves and those around us.

### ***Living Out Our Personal Values***

Living congruently with one's values is fulfilling while living in conflict with one's values is both unfulfilling and stressful. Lopper (2011) believes that stress does not result from hard work, long hours, or multiple roles in life. Stress results primarily from values conflicts. When people are in situations where they are unable to honor their personal values, they will feel stressed and no amount of relaxation, meditation, or exercise will eliminate the stress until they resolve the values conflict. Addressing this tension may involve adjusting one's values (or at least the way we prioritize them), advocating one's values despite the tension, or moving away from the situation that is creating the values dissonance. Understanding one's life's purpose and gleaning from the wisdom of others can help to clarify which direction is best. For Christians, committing the matter to prayer and listening to God's voice through Scripture will not only help with discerning the appropriate course to take in the future, but can provide the necessary strength to navigate the turbulent waters in the present.

For leaders, living out their personal values gives them a great advantage in shaping their organization's culture. Leaders who practice their personal values set a clear example to others. They are aware of why they make decisions and how those decisions impact the people around them. They have an internal guidance system, which some might call a conscience. This internal GPS helps them make the tough choices and feel confident and courageous in their decisions.

Rue (2001) says leaders who are in tune with their personal values and live in harmony with them tend to be more positive and find greater satisfaction in life and work. They tend to form trusting relationships more readily. Multiple life studies reveal they live healthier lives. They are comfortable with themselves, and they treat themselves and



others with compassion, respect, and care.

### ***Developing Our Personal Values***

As indicated earlier, we develop our personal values through family interactions (especially during the early, formative years), ongoing connections with people in various communities of which we are a part, faith experiences, educational influences, life situations, and workplace experiences. Ganly (2010) believes that the development of personal values is a lifelong process that affects all areas of life. Personal values develop through experience and learning. She believes our personal values form and reform over time and impact our personal lives as well as our professional lives. In contrast to this position, the BHO Group (2009) believes that our values rarely change. When they do, it is usually because of a very difficult experience, “the kind of experience that leaves us questioning our purpose in life” (BHO, p. 9). They further state that if our values are out of sync with our priorities, our actions will continually fall short of our intentions and our consciences will bother us incessantly.

Whether one leans towards Ganly (2010) or the BHO Group (2009), it is obvious that the development of strong personal values is essential to ongoing personal growth and increasingly effective service as transformational servant leaders. It is also clear that understanding our personal values is important to who we are, how we behave, and the influence we have on others and ourselves.

Many organizations have produced a variety of helpful tools and guidelines for developing one’s personal values. For the purposes of this paper, an overview and compilation of some of them provides the following starting points for personal consideration:

1. **Identify** all value descriptors that you feel are relevant to you personally.
2. **Discern** your “core” personal values (no more than six to eight). Look for core values that will help you live out your life purpose in a maximum way, that are compatible with the communities that are important to you, and that align with the central texts that serve as moral compasses in your life.
3. **Define** those core values clearly. For example, if you choose “excellence” as a value descriptor, what does excellence mean to you? For example, your statement regarding excellence might be, “I will strive to do my best in every situation in light of the resources at my disposal.”
4. **Create** a checklist of specific value-based guidelines that are in line with the value statement. Again, using excellence as an example, some of your guidelines might be:
  - a. I will stay updated on \_\_\_\_\_ (the subject you want to excel in).
  - b. I will give 100% in everything I do and will not settle for less.
  - c. Just enough is not good enough.
5. **Implement** your personal values. For a pre-determined timeframe (15-30 days), resolve to make all decisions with your set of core values in mind. Everything you do should support your personal values system. At the end of your pre-determined timeframe, review and identify where you excelled and where you fell short with the focus on improving the growth areas in the future.

6. **Find** an “accountability partner” who can hold you accountable to your own core values. This person should be someone you trust and who knows you very well.

## Examples of Values-Based Leadership

People experience significant personal strength, confidence and power when they discern their values, adjust them to make sure they are balanced and healthy, and create ways to honor them through their actions and decisions. In the previous sections, we have defined and described VBL. With this strong theoretical foundation in place, we will now look at four examples of VBL in business, Christian ministry/non-profit, education, and healthcare. We will also examine real life examples of values-based leaders who have demonstrated strong personal values that have had a profound impact on their organizations.

**Business.** With revenues topping \$60 billion in 2011, Caterpillar is the world's leading manufacturer of construction and mining equipment, diesel and natural gas engines, industrial gas turbines, and diesel-electric locomotives (Caterpillar, 2012). The company also is a leading services provider through Caterpillar Financial Services, Caterpillar Remanufacturing Services, Caterpillar Logistics Services, and Progress Rail Services.

However, in the late 1980s, Caterpillar found itself at a critical crossroads. The market, economy and customer expectations had changed. The company was experiencing heavy financial losses, employees were bitter and unengaged, and the company culture was caustic. The Track-Type Tractor Division, of which Jim Despain was the Vice-President and General Manager, was losing tens of millions of dollars each year. After trying every standard approach (e.g., Total Quality Control, cost cutting, equipment upgrades), Despain and his team of managers introduced a radical approach which focused on the leadership, the company culture, and the employee's work experience (Despain & Converse, 2003). Their honest look in the mirror led to the development and implementation of a VBL model they called, “Our Common Values,” which emphasized values such as trust, mutual respect, teamwork, and empowerment.

Despain (Despain & Converse, 2003) describes his experience of VBL while serving as a manager in Japan. He encountered a Japanese leadership concept called *kaizen*, which emerged in Japan following World War II. The word Kaizen means “continuous improvement.” It comes from the Japanese words 改 (“kai”) which means “change” or “to correct” and 善 (“zen”) which means “good.” Kaizen is a system that encourages every employee from upper management to the cleaning crew to look continuously for ways to improve the workplace.

One year after implementing the “Our Common Values” model, there was a noticeable shift in the company culture resulting in a more positive experience for employees and customers. Less than three years after the introduction of the values model, Despain's division showed a profit. Within five years, the division had cut its break-even production point by 50%, increasing profits consistently on a yearly basis. In looking back over his experience with VBL at Caterpillar, Despain concludes:

*Over the years we proved, without a doubt, that the right behavior produces the right results. Values-based leadership is also a process – a human process. The better and more consistent the values-based leadership process is, the better and more consistent are the organization’s results (Despain & Converse, 2003, p.188).*

**Ministry/Non-Profit.** John and Deanna Hayes are the General Directors of InnerCHANGE, a mission that works among the poor in five countries. The mission’s approach is to “share the Good News in words and works through personal relationships” (Hayes, 2006, back cover). In his book, “*sub-merge*,” Hayes presents personal examples of how building authentic, faith-based relationships can change the world and communities one person at a time.

*sub-merge* tells the story of an approach to incarnational ministry that propels Hayes and his colleagues to live in the communities and cultures they desire to impact. Their approach is to love and affirm the dignity of all while caring for and meeting their needs. This ministry focus does not rely on buildings or programs, but on living out one’s values amongst the people one is trying to touch. Instead of trying to *draw in* the lost and the poor, the approach is to *go out* to them - to live out one’s values and the Gospel message among the people. Jesus used this same incarnational approach when he came to live amongst his creation.

**InnerCHANGE** missionaries are regular people who live in neighborhoods around the world as church planters, community partners and organizers, local workers, and most importantly, neighbors. They live and lead by their values, and in doing so have made a significant difference in the lives of individuals and communities globally. They follow the examples of other incarnational values-based leaders like St. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa. Their actions align with Dr. Bobby Clinton’s statement, “Effective ministry flows out of our being, not just our doing” (Hayes, 2006, p.18).

**Education.** Leaders at the University of Denver’s graduate business program developed a leadership model “that starts with the bricks and mortar foundation of values and ethics” (Plemmons, 2002, p. 40). The Daniels College of Business (2012) provides “rigorous training in business fundamentals coupled with values-based leadership and ethical decision making.” The program combines broad exposure to literature on ethical leadership with experiential learning that forces learners to evaluate and even reshape their personal values. An important part of the experiential learning is a three-day camp experience, which involves team-based activities, reflective journaling and peer feedback. With decades of research to support their contention, Kouzes and Pozner (2007) maintain that one of the five practices of exemplary leaders is to model the way – to clarify one’s values and to live them consistently before others. The University of Denver’s graduate business program seeks to help students with this discernment and application process so that they grow solid values that will have a positive impact on their organizations and those they serve.

**Health.** When Al Stubblefield, Chief Operating Officer and later CEO of the Baptist Health Care Corporation, told board members in 1995 that the organization would go from the eighteenth percentile in patient satisfaction to the seventy-fifth percentile in nine months, one board member told him that he had set them up for failure (Stubblefield, 2005). What the doubting board member may not have realized was that Stubblefield had an unflinching commitment to the value of service excellence. Over the next nine months, Stubblefield implemented measures in keeping with this value, which resulted in patient satisfaction exceeding the seventy-five percentile goal. Stubblefield's strong commitment to service excellence drove him to create and maintain a great culture, select and retain great employees, continuously develop great leaders, and hardwire success through systems of accountability. One of the results has been that the organization has made it onto Forbes's list of the top 100 companies to work for every year since 2002. VBL made a difference for countless patients and employees in this healthcare organization.

## Conclusion

We believe that it is impossible to be effective, transformational servant leaders without practicing VBL. Therefore, it is imperative that all who desire to be transformational servant leaders commit themselves to discerning their personal values, critiquing them against their life purpose and other standards/values, developing values that will bring maximum benefit to themselves and others, and to then live those values consistently so that they produce like values in the people and organizations they serve. Then, we will be in a strong position to demonstrate a robust form of TSL that can have a significant local and global impact.

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