

Harness the Power of the 5 Core Moral Values

Compliance and Ethics


CORE VALUES



For decades now, compliance and ethics professionals, and many corporate executives, have sought to build “values-based” cultures rather than “rules-based” cultures. Such initiatives are grounded in the well-founded belief that, unlike rules that merely dictate what employees can and cannot do, values have the power to inspire, motivate, and engage people to do their best work in accordance with high ethical standards.

Moreover, unlike a rule book, values can promote a harmonious, productive work environment. They also hold out the prospect of acting as a “North Star” to help employees navigate a complex moral landscape and make ethical choices even in circumstances where there is no rule. But what values are the most potent in achieving these goals? Will any values do or are some superior to others? To answer these questions, let’s start with a recognition that the word “value” has three distinct meanings:

1. **Measurement values:** Mathematical values or something’s characteristics like size, age, length, color, weight, temperature, cost, beauty, or worth.
2. **Things that are valued:** Money, fame, growth, fun, glory, productivity, creativity, relationships, family, vacations, and hard work.
3. **Moral values:** Ideas or concepts related to good and bad behavior.

An internet search for corporations’ core values yields terms or phrases that appear to fall into all three categories listed above. Here’s a short sample of hundreds posted on the web:

- Stewardship

- The best people
- Client value creation
- One global network
- Respect for the individual
- Integrity
- Create a culture of honesty
- Make beauty
- Outperform
- Service matters
- Sustain life
- Be accessible
- Pay it forward
- Fun!

If the objective of publishing words or phrases is to promote a values-based culture that will minimize legal and ethical risks, foster productive human relationships and optimize business performance, I believe there are five universal values that trump all others. This biased view was born from an exercise in which I participated as a brand new vice president of business ethics and compliance over a decade ago.

Within months of my appointment to this post, I attended an ethical fitness seminar hosted by the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, ME. The seminar was facilitated by Dr. Rushworth Kidder, the founder and president of the Institute for Global Ethics. The seminar cohort that accompanied me comprised an eclectic group with representatives from both for-profit and nonprofit sectors. One participant was the chaplain at the US Air Force Academy.

During one segment of this day and a half-long seminar, Dr. Kidder asked us to play the role of a school board seeking to identify five values to be carved on a keystone to be lodged at the top of an archway at the entrance to a new school. The idea was to have students see these values every time they entered the school.

Dr. Kidder commenced this exercise by facilitating a free-for-all brainstorming session that culminated in a list of over 100 words describing values we prized highly. After completing this task, Dr. Kidder split the group in two and asked each subgroup to reach a consensus on just five of the many values on the list.

After much debate, each group independently reached agreement on the five values that they thought should be carved in the keystone above the school entrance. We then reassembled in plenary session.

Surprisingly, out of the innumerable permutations of value sets that could have been selected, both groups had picked the same five words. Dr. Kidder then turned his projector on showing a slide he had prepared in advance listing the same five values both groups had independently selected. As we all marveled at this result, Dr. Kidder explained that he knew we were going to select these five words because everyone always does. He told us that he had performed the same exercise in numerous countries around the globe and that, with few exceptions, the results were always the same.

The universal values our group discovered through this process were: respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty, and compassion (hereinafter “Core Moral Values”). For those seeking a “North Star” by which to guide employee decision-making and corporate values that promote a harmonious

and productive work environment, the Core Moral Values tower above all other alternatives in their potency. Conversely, remove any one of these values from an organization and you will invariably witness misconduct and serious disfunction. Unlike “things” that we value like productivity, financial success, and problem solving, Core Moral Values are essential to productive human relationships.

I recently found further confirmation regarding the universality and importance of the Core Moral Values in a paper entitled “The Four Values Framework: Fairness, Respect, Care and Honesty” published by Springer that was first posted online on May 29, 2019. The authors of this paper chronicle an international initiative to develop the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings (GCC). Following a lengthy collaboration between representatives from multiple cultures, the final GCC was grounded in the values listed above in the article’s title. Interestingly, they defined “care” broadly to include the concepts of “compassion” and “responsibility.” Consequently, the four GCC values match the Core Moral Values we discovered in the Ethical Fitness Seminar I participated in over a decade ago.

But it’s important to recognize an essential point. The words your corporation selects to describe its “core values” mean far less than whether the Core Moral Values are consistently reflected in your culture and the behavior of every individual from the top to the bottom of the house. Words don’t drive behavior in organizations, leadership does. Regardless of whether your company has expressly adopted one or more of the Core Moral Values, it is vital that you and your leaders strive to create a work environment that is fair, respectful, compassionate, honest, and responsible.

In so doing, it’s also important to measure the degree to which your efforts are bearing fruit. Be sure to deploy anonymous surveys designed to determine whether employees across your enterprise are committed to the Core Moral Values and witnessing the same with their leaders and their peers. Taking these actions will optimize your firm’s capacity to achieve sustained value creation for all stakeholders.

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