

## Values and their importance

*Humans and organizations are driven by different values.*

Health and safety messages or initiatives are likely to fall flat if we misjudge the culture of our target audience. 'Culture' includes things such as values. But what are 'values' and why are they important?

Values give powerful insights into why individuals and organizations act in certain ways. People have greater motivation to perform an action if the anticipated outcomes of that behaviour are important to them.

If security is especially important to an individual, they are more likely to purchase insurance products and put their life savings in a low risk/low return savings account, rather than invest in a high-risk venture.

Shalom Schwartz describes values as deeply held beliefs, which are emotionally significant. A person who highly values creativity and stimulation, for example, is likely to despair if they are in a monotonous job but could be happy in a role where they can come up with their own ways of working.

By recognizing that different people have different values, health and safety professionals can make their messages more personally meaningful and powerful to their audiences. Some ex-military personnel strongly believe in the importance of hierarchy and the need for the rank-and-file to follow protocols. The underlying value could be summarized as 'rules are right'. A concise instruction, signed by a senior manager, might be received more positively by these individuals than other staff.

Values influence decisions and behaviour through our norms, beliefs and attitudes. For example, someone who values recognition and status (a value that Schwartz calls achievement) could have internalized the norm that this can be realized through success at work.

They might believe that being the most productive member of the team is the best way of standing out from the crowd. This could fuel a positive attitude towards neatly organized workplaces, which promote efficient work, and a negative attitude towards health and safety measures that they perceive as slowing them down. We could initially be surprised that such a fastidiously tidy worker could be wandering around without wearing the required PPE.

Values are so deeply entrenched that people aren't always consciously aware of them or their impact on their decisions and behaviour. I was out and about with a friend of mine when we saw an elderly woman fall over outside a shop. Without a moment's hesitation, i.e. without consciously weighing up the pros and cons, my friend rushed over and checked that this complete stranger was OK. This is fairly typical of a value that Schwartz calls 'benevolence'.

Had the incident occurred in a workplace, a no running rule would have gone out of the window as my friend's concern for others would outweigh the importance he attaches to complying with rules. This could bring him into conflict with a rules-focussed manager or organization. Effective communication skills (perhaps a coaching style), an open mind and personal insight are essential in helping us to constructively explore how values might influence, how we, and the people around us behave.

## The human values

Schwartz uses some rather obscure words to describe human values, and he identified 10 in total. His model, which was based on surveys of more than 25,000 people in 44 countries with a range of different cultures, is widely used. It is even a core element of the *European Social Survey*: A cross-national survey conducted every two years.

A subsequent team of researchers, including Schwartz, condensed these values into four core groups. These are explained below from the perspective of a worker or manager who strongly subscribes to that value. An interpretation is offered about the relevance to health and safety.

**Relations:** This person is highly motivated to protect and promote the wellbeing of their in-group (friends, colleagues and family). Some 'relations' people are driven to safeguard the environment or people who aren't in their immediate circle.

This person might be genuinely concerned about the impact of an incident on their colleagues and family so health and safety campaigns that promote 'caring for each other' or 'mates looking after mates' may appeal to this person. When they assess risks or plan work, they might consider the potential impact on the wider community, vulnerable groups or the environment. These people may be motivated by schemes which have a positive impact beyond the workplace such as rewarding hazard reports with charity donations. They may be enthusiastic about measures, which are shown to safeguard the environment as well as health and safety.

**Risks:** This person seeks opportunities to be creative, autonomous and/or find stimulation and excitement.

This person could be prepared to challenge (or possibly ignore) rules, which stifle them but can offer innovative ideas. These people could be motivated to participate in committees or workshops, which are fast paced and allow them to creatively identify problems and find solutions. They may respond well to messages that emphasize how good health and safety management helped the company to successfully deliver exciting and innovative projects.

**Results:** This person strives for success, because they value the status, social recognition and influence that this success brings them.

This person might respond positively if health and safety achievements are recognized or rewarded. A mention at a team meeting or in a newsletter may be a great motivator. They may take on additional responsibilities, e.g. becoming safety representatives, if there was some status attached to it, such as knowing that they will meet senior managers or if it led to training that might support career progression. Equating health and safety with success is important to engage this person, such as by having health and safety key performance indicators associated with tangible, personal benefits.

**Rules:** This person values security, certainty and maybe routine. They may be more likely to adopt traditional ('old school') norms, which will be expressed in behaviours such as always arriving 15 minutes early for a meeting. They tend to respect community leaders or those in authority.

This person is likely to be naturally motivated to comply with procedures, but can find it hard to change ("We've always done it this way"). We need to understand, from their perspective, what traditions are essential to retain, as well as securing the support of key influencers to show that change is OK (e.g. asking them to mentor others). These people will feel comfortable in meetings that meticulously review the previous minutes. They may not be a great source of innovative ideas, but can be very dependable.

The values are not mutually exclusive. There are many examples of high-performing food companies whose business models are genuinely driven as much by ethical considerations as their profit margins: They equally value 'relations' and 'results'. A rules-oriented ex-soldier might miss some of the excitement and unpredictability of her military career, i.e. she values risk, but perhaps less highly than rules.

Transformational leaders have an ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the individual needs of workers. A person who likes to know exactly what they need to do, when and where could feel incredibly insecure if they are put into a position where they have high levels of autonomy and discretion. A transformational leader might adopt a fairly directive approach (i.e. may be more 'transactional') while supporting the worker through a period of transition.

Problems can arise if personal values conflict with the values required by an organization or a particular role. A person who prizes risk may not be well suited to the role of air traffic controller. Consideration of human values may influence selection processes and task design.

By appreciating that humans, and organizations, are driven by different values, health and safety professionals are able to create powerful messages and develop initiatives that capitalize on the innate motivations of workers and managers. Initiatives might even be designed to appeal to all four values, so that everyone is able to 'buy in'.

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