

# Values-Based Culture

Defining and measuring organizational values—the building blocks of a healthy, high-performance culture.



A man and a woman are high-fiving in an office setting. The man is on the left, wearing a checkered shirt and glasses, and the woman is on the right, wearing a blue and white striped shirt and glasses. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background shows a window with a view of a building and some potted plants on a shelf.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                       | <b>1</b> |
| <b>Selecting and Defining Your Values</b> | <b>3</b> |
| <b>Measuring Values Alignment</b>         | <b>7</b> |
| <b>Next Steps</b>                         | <b>8</b> |
| <b>Appendix 1: Sample List of Values</b>  | <b>9</b> |

*For over 20 years, Junxion Strategy has been developing brands, enterprises, and organizational cultures, drawing on the enduring power of shared values to underpin high performance. In this briefing, we outline some definitions and share some processes you can use to select, define, and measure your organizational values. Do this work well and consistently, and your culture will help you lift talent engagement, customer loyalty, positive impact, and financial returns.*

# What are ‘Values?’

## Values are the Building Blocks of Social Alignment, Enduring Relationships, and Shared Meaning.

Simply put, values are deeply held beliefs that motivate the actions of people, groups, organizations, and even whole cultures. They guide decision-making and behaviour, and they help us to navigate social life, because they help us to anticipate how others will respond or react to the things we say and do.

Sociologists and anthropologists show us that shared values are massively scalable and remarkably durable. In fact, studies have shown that across vast expanses of space and time, humans actually vary only a little in the scope of our values. We also know that the values we hold as individuals are drawn from the same, consistent set of values that shape behaviours of entire nations and states. And these haven’t meaningfully changed since humans started to come together in societies.

### So when we think about values, what we’re really thinking about is what unites us in communities.

The renowned management author [Patrick Lencioni wrote in Harvard Business Review](#)<sup>1</sup> about a typology of values. In the organizational context, he identifies four types:

- **Core Values** “are the deeply ingrained principles that guide all of a company’s actions; they serve as its cultural cornerstones.” These three(-ish) carefully named values are a decision lens for strategy and planning, management, hiring, product and service design, and more. Consider, for example, [Apple’s commitment to ‘Privacy,’](#)<sup>2</sup> one of its core values.
- **Aspirational Values** “are those that a company needs to succeed in the future but currently lacks.” For example, perhaps a high-growth company that’s settling into a durable point of scale aspires to embed ‘Work / Life Balance’ after a period of imbalance.

- **Permission-to-Play Values** “simply reflect the minimum behavioural and social standards required of any employee.” Values like ‘respect,’ ‘integrity,’ and ‘honesty’ sound good, but it’s hard to imagine an enduring organization that acts disrespectfully, out of integrity, or dishonestly! These are social and societal norms that should be stated as baseline expectations.
- **Accidental Values** “arise spontaneously without being cultivated by leadership and take hold over time.” Lencioni shares a great example of a fashion startup that found itself accidentally prioritizing hires that were “trendy, youthful, and cool”—great traits, but not quite aligned to their core values of “trust (being honest and credible), action (making independent decisions), and ownership (treating the company as if one were a founder).” Accidental values can pull a culture—and an organization—off course. And this is an essential point: if you don’t shape your culture around carefully selected, core values, it will take on a life of its own, shaped by accidental values. Put another way, your organization will have a culture. As a leader, part of your job is to shape that culture to align to your purpose and your strategy.

We would add one more type: Assumed Values. These are often regional norms that people might assume are upheld within an organization. This alignment to the broader community in which an organization operates contributes to people’s confidence and comfort within the organization. However, sometimes assumptions can be invalid, so it’s important to acknowledge what might be assumed and consider whether it should be made more explicit.

In 2024, for example, ambitious and energetic commitment emerged as an assumed value at Junxion. We surfaced it as ‘entrepreneurialism’ and will consider whether it should be included among our core or permission-to-play values.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2002/07/make-your-values-mean-something>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apple.com/privacy/>

A woman with curly hair, wearing a blue and white striped dress, is speaking to a man in a light blue shirt. They are in a meeting setting, with the woman gesturing with her hands. The background is a blurred office environment.

### A Word on 'Authenticity'

Often, in discussions of values and values-based leadership, the word 'authenticity' is used variously to describe honesty or trustworthiness, openness or accessibility, and clarity or predictability. Here's a more helpful way to think about authenticity. At Junxion, we define it as 'the consistent adherence to stated values through time.' Whatever your core values, if you integrate them in your strategy, brand, culture, and operations and hold your decisions to them unwaveringly through time, you'll build an authentic brand—one that is indeed trustworthy, accessible, and clear.

# Selecting and Defining Your Values

## Choose Them Wisely and Define Them Carefully

Like so many strategic activities, selecting and defining your organizational values can be a complicated and long-winded process—but it doesn't have to be. Fundamentally, there are two things you need to achieve. Here's a streamlined approach to do both.

### Pick the Words, Then Refine Them

There are plenty of lists of values available online. (There's a good list in Appendix 1.) The first challenge, of course, is to pick the ones that are most important for you and your organization. Here are three tips for making your selections:

1. **Connect Strategy and Culture:** Ambitious organizations can be stymied by so many factors, many of which are beyond their control. One thing they can control is their culture. And a high performance culture can help organizations to outpace even their boldest ambitions. So what are the cultural imperatives you need in order to achieve the ambitions of your strategy? We often think of strategy and culture independently from one another, but they're better conceived as two parts of an integrated whole.
2. **Involve Your Team:** Culture is a team sport. While it can feel efficient for a small, aligned leadership team to name organizational values, in practice that only makes the work of cultivating team buy-in all the more difficult. So poll your whole team: What do your staff think are the core values of the organization? What values do they think should be uplifted in order to achieve your strategy? It's easy to set up a simple survey or poll and then to look for common ground.

3. **Stick to the 'Rule of Three':** People seem hard-wired to remember trios! ('Good, better, best!' 'Sticks, straw, and bricks!' 'Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!' The list goes on and on... and on.) One aspect of values' accessibility and utility is simply our ability to remember them! Stick to just three, and the chances of people remembering them goes up dramatically. Of course, all rules are made to be broken; even we at Junxion have four core values! So the takeaway here is to ensure they're memorable.

Speaking of making them memorable, picking the words is one thing, refining them so they really feel like they're yours is the next step. There are a couple of reasons to do this. First, you may identify values that are really similar. Consider 'Continual learning' and 'Innovation' from the list in the Appendix. They're not identical, but they are similar. So perhaps these could be combined and refined.

Second, this creates an opportunity to develop distinctive words or phrases that bring more character to your values: 'Perpetual Innovation' could be both meaningful to your organization and easier to remember.

Make these refinements with your team (or a committee empowered to do this work) and you'll generate buy-in along the way—so your new cultural values will take root fast.

## Share Stories, Then Unpack Them

So you've got a list of three (or four) choice words or phrases that really resonate with your team and that align to your strategic intentions. Next, consider that if a value is really going to drive expectations and behaviours day-to-day, there's another important step to take.

Effective values are supported by a small set of guiding principles. These are guides to behaviour. They're not so narrow as to be prescriptive, nor are they so broad as to be impractical. At Junxion, the best way we've found to articulate guiding principles also happens to be fun: share stories.

'Tell me about a time when you've experienced 'Perpetual Innovation' here?' is a powerful question that prompts the answerer to reflect on whether the value is a really accurate representation of the organization, and also to share examples of when they've experienced that value in action.

Perhaps they tell a story of a time when a product was about to ship and someone noted a small opportunity to make a change that would make the product far more valuable. So they pushed the ship date by 24 hours, made the change, and soon received amazing customer accolades. Or perhaps they tell a story of a time when a customer courageously shared a service complaint and a patient manager took diligent care of the problem and then pointed out to leaders where the company could do better.

In the first instance, there are a couple of durable principles: 'Make the small changes that make a big impact' and 'Thrill our customers.' In the second instance, there's one more principle: 'Listen well: you never know what we'll learn!'

These are applicable principles that can guide behaviours within the organization. In fact, **GUIDE** is a great acronym Michael Quinn Patton uses to support development of effective guiding principles. They should be...

- **Guiding:** They should be framed as an imperative: "Do this."
- **Useful:** They should inform choices and decisions—so they're actionable, interpretable, and feasible.
- **Inspiring:** They say what matters—in how to proceed, and the result. So they're meaningful.
- **Developmental:** They should be applicable in diverse contexts, and over time.
- **Evaluable:** They should empower managers to ensure principles are being followed.

If you can articulate three or four guiding principles for each of your core values, you'll have a solid, durable foundation for your organizational culture. These guiding principles largely 'define' the values. However, you may also consider a brief definition for the value itself to ensure clarity.

Here's a real example from one of Junxion's clients:

**Value:** 'We cultivate belonging.'

**Definition:** We meet everyone with empathy, acceptance, and respect. We help build more welcoming and inclusive communities.

**Guiding Principles:**

- Come as you are! We embrace diversity.
- We work to break down the barriers that hold back equity, justice, and a sense of belonging.
- We celebrate and enhance people's unique strengths, so they reach their full potential.
- We respect the identities and traditions of diverse cultures.

**Socialize Your Values Proudly**

Finally, share the values to your whole organization! Roll them out with some pomp and circumstance! The more seriously you celebrate this work, the more seriously your colleagues will take it—and the more quickly you'll bring your culture into alignment with your newly articulated values.

If you follow this model and come up with some truly inspiring and distinctive values, we'd love to see them! Please share them to us via [hello@junxion.com](mailto:hello@junxion.com)







# Measuring Values Alignment

## What Gets Measured Gets Managed

So you've selected your values, articulated guiding principles, and socialized them across your organization. Now you'll want to ensure they stick—and the best way to manage that is to measure them.

Strictly speaking, what we're talking about here is that 'authenticity' thing! How well is your organizational culture adhering to the stated, core values (and guiding principles) through time? Measuring this can help you to identify opportunities to improve the organization and its operations, and even reveal unstated ('accidental' or 'assumed') values that you might want to unearth and examine.

### How Do You Measure Values?!

Counterintuitive, perhaps. But this is why the guiding principles are so important: they're evaluable. Using an anonymous survey tool, simply ask everyone on your team to what degree they experience the values and guiding principles in their day-to-day work. Have them rate adherence on a five-point scale: always, often, occasionally, rarely, never.

Consider adding departmental and demographic questions, too. For example, in one recent survey, we asked respondents to select their tenure (1-5 years, 6-10 years, 10-15 years, and 16+ years). We found a remarkable difference in experience of the organizational culture among people who had been with the organization for 6-10 years. At first, this struck us as an odd anomaly, but of course it piqued our curiosity. On investigation we found the problem, identified a training gap from that cohort's on-boarding and were able to design an intervention to help them feel more engaged and supported at work

If you have multiple locations, ask respondents to choose the location where they work; if you have multiple departments, ask for those; and be sure to ask for gender and other social identities, too. In short, set yourself up to understand differences across your organization.

## On Equity and Belonging

Disaggregating data by gender and race or ethnicity is a best practice in working towards equity. It will afford you the opportunity to assess whether underrepresented or marginalized groups are being left behind, or not experiencing the same outcomes as other groups.

For example, let's say that your male staff all ranked a principle about shared learning as a strength, while all female-identifying staff ranked it lower. This might suggest that you're serving men well, but something is not going quite as you hoped it might for women. Or perhaps it's white and white-presenting folks who feel happy with their experience of 'shared learning,' but people of colour do not. In either case, these questions would give you the opportunity to investigate the apparent inequity and find solutions—definitely something you would want to be able to do.

### This is Not a 'One and Done' Exercise

All organizational cultures evolve over time. (Remember, accidental values show up precisely when we don't expect them!) So use your values survey on a regular rhythm. For most organizations, an annual assessment is probably sufficient. For organizations navigating significant change, a semi-annual or even quarterly assessment might be better. Choose the rhythm that makes sense in your organization's planning cycles.

Each time you run the test, you'll identify areas of strength and areas of opportunity to improve. So each time you complete the analysis, you'll be able to embark on projects or initiatives to make improvements. In this way, regular assessment drives continuous improvement.

# Next Steps

## DIY, Coaching, or More

This guide provides a 'do it yourself' approach to defining the values that shape organizational culture, and assessing leaders' and managers' success in aligning people's experiences at work to those values. We've outlined an approach that we have seen work well in small social ventures, high-growth organizations, and large corporations. And of course these same tools work in nonprofits, too.

If you find yourself needing more support, or if your work uncovers a thorny issue that you'd like help to navigate, reach out. We're happy to lend some coaching support.

And of course, if capacity is constrained and you'd prefer for us to deliver this work, we'd love to chat. Sometimes it's better to have these conversations with an objective third party advisor. We're here to help, because your success contributes to the changes in the world of work that we all want to see.

Let's Be Audacious, Together...



Four of Junxion's B Corp experts at the annual B Corp Festival in the UK.

# Appendix 1: Sample List of Values

This list is condensed from a list of 500 values we found online. While it's a good list of words that are easy to understand, it may be flawed by cultural bias. So if necessary, you might take some time to find a similar list that is more compatible with the culture in your nation, state, or community.

|                  |                |               |              |
|------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|
| Above and Beyond | Clarity        | Dignity       | Generosity   |
| Accessibility    | Cleverness     | Discipline    | Genius       |
| Accountability   | Collaboration  | Diversity     | Goodness     |
| Achievement      | Commitment     | Drive         | Gratitude    |
| Adaptability     | Community      | Duty          | Growth       |
| Adventure        | Compassion     | Economy       | Happiness    |
| Affection        | Competence     | Education     | Health       |
| Alertness        | Completion     | Effectiveness | Honesty      |
| Altruism         | Confidence     | Efficiency    | Hope         |
| Ambition         | Connection     | Elegance      | Humility     |
| Appreciation     | Consistency    | Empathy       | Humor        |
| Assertiveness    | Contentment    | Encouragement | Imagination  |
| Awareness        | Contribution   | Energy        | Impact       |
| Balance          | Courage        | Enthusiasm    | Independence |
| Belonging        | Courtesy       | Equality      | Innovation   |
| Boldness         | Creativity     | Ethics        | Insight      |
| Bravery          | Credibility    | Excellence    | Integrity    |
| Calmness         | Curiosity      | Exploration   | Justice      |
| Capability       | Customer Focus | Fairness      | Knowledge    |
| Candor           | Daring         | Faithfulness  | Leadership   |
| Caring           | Decency        | Family        | Loyalty      |
| Certainty        | Decisiveness   | Fearlessness  | Wisdom       |
| Challenge        | Dedication     | Fidelity      |              |
| Charity          | Democracy      | Flexibility   |              |
| Citizenship      | Dependability  | Focus         |              |
| Cleanliness      | Determination  | Freedom       |              |



**VANCOUVER & TORONTO**

**1 888 681 8308**

**LONDON**

**+44 (0)20 3475 2157**

**JUNXION.COM**



**CANADIAN  
PURPOSE  
ECONOMY  
PROJECT**



MEMBER  
of the  
**WELLBEING  
ECONOMY  
ALLIANCE**



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>