

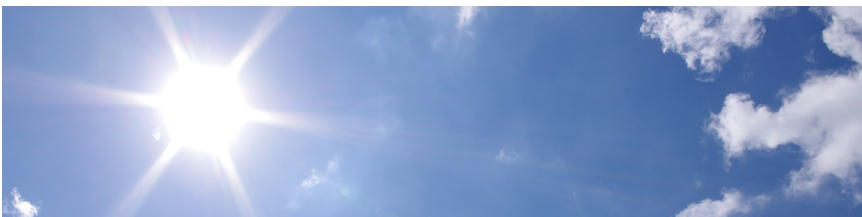


VALUES  
with  
Teeth

# VALUES WITH TEETH

By Levi Nieminen, Ph.D.,  
Director of Research and Senior Consultant  
with Denison Consulting

A number of years back, Patrick Lencioni wrote, "Make your values mean something." His Harvard Business Review article ([HBR](#)) is a must-read for any executives toying with the idea of creating values statements in their companies, particularly those who may be doing so lightly. For those of you who have charged past Lencioni's warnings and, for good reason, are searching for the best ways to get it right, this brief article builds on that discussion to describe two tests that can help you to avoid creating a values set that is "bland, toothless, or just plain dishonest."



## TEST #1

### AVOID THE "FEEL-GOODS"

The first test is rooted in the idea that you really don't need values, and certainly not values statements, to help you celebrate the wins, big or small, that come with success and good times. This is not to say that companies should not look for and try to replicate the sources of past success, but rather to suggest that soul-searching and introspection are perhaps better spent on the rainy days than the bright, sunny ones. Can you imagine what the phrase "searching for explanations" would mean to the champions as they are carried off the field in victory? I can't.

On the other hand, values can be very useful as a framework for understanding and explaining the tough situations we all face in organizations—but *only if they have adequately sharpened teeth.*

- **Here is a simple test.** Recall the three most challenging situations your organization [or team, etc.] has faced in the last few years and what the organization did in response to these situations. Now answer the following question: *Do the values help to make sense of what was done and why?*

If the values ring hollow or irrelevant for the most challenging situations that are faced, it is hard to imagine how they will help people face down the next ones that are certainly coming. On the other hand, the identity of the organization can be galvanized when people see a response that is consistent with the articulated values. And they may not always like the decision (particularly if it disadvantages them personally), but they can understand and respect it.

*The magic is in the simplicity but also in the universality.*

Although I do this work for a living, one of my favorite examples of values that pass Test #1 has nothing to do with the workplace. The example was shared by a senior HR executive, who described the values she and her husband use to manage the

toughest organization of all, a family with young children! Three core values are discussed again and again, whether over breakfast, at the playground, or on the way to and from school. 1. *Tell the truth.* 2. *Love your brother (she has two sons).* 3. *Do your best.*

When one brother punches the other, the million-dollar question is not far behind the initiation of a time-out: *What value did you break?* Response after pause and sullen look: *I wasn't loving my brother.* When playing distracts the boys from eating at the dinner table... *I wasn't trying my best...*

The magic is in the simplicity but also in the universality. Almost every tough situation that plays out can be analyzed using those three simple rules that we must commit to above all else. And perhaps most importantly, they have teeth! In a moment where some reflection is needed, the rules are a useful way to understand what went wrong, why mom and dad responded the way they did, and what must be different next time. The boys may not always like it, but I'm confident they will grow to understand and respect it.

# TEST #2

LOOK AT THE "ILLOGICAL" SIDE



The second test is rooted in the idea that values are most helpful to an organization when there is either no clear logic or evidence base to guide the way ahead or when organizations purposefully deviate from the logic and evidence that does exist. These days, most organizations are running as far and as fast away from values-based decisions as they can. Big data and bigger analytics; let the numbers decide! But in management, we're a long ways from a complete robot-takeover ([NPR's Planet Money](#)), and it is precisely in those moments where the information we need isn't available, that our values show themselves. What do we do when we don't know what to do? We fall back on what we believe to be true in absence of the facts. We fall back on our values.

- **Here is a simple test.** Recall the last three times when your organization [or team, etc.] made a decision "shooting from the hip," that is, when you didn't have the intel that you wanted. In each case, describe the decision that was made and how the decision was reached. Now answer the following question: *Do the values help you to explain or justify what was decided and why?*

Akin to the most challenging situations, it is the most "illogical"

decisions that will require the most explanation and understanding for people. And as access to solid data improves, the illogical will come to represent more of what sets organizations apart. If carefully conceived, values can communicate the "leanings" or "biases" that will shape the organization's decisions when on the shakiest of grounds.

An interesting example of a value that passes Test #2 is Mark Cuban's "zigzag theory," which goes something like: *When other organizations zig, we zag.* As the owner of the Dallas Mavericks (and perhaps most widely known as the "Shark Tank" investor), Mark's organization has built a reputation for looking at what the competition is doing and then taking steps in the opposite direction...

"... when there is a rush for everyone to do the same thing, it becomes more difficult to do. Not easier. Harder. It also means that as other teams follow their lead, it creates opportunities for those who have followed a dif-

ferent path" ([Cuban via SI's coverage of his blog](#)).

Sport, like business, is a fascinating arena to see how advances in knowledge over time continue to change the rules of competition. Some organizations will lead that charge and others will follow. But along the way, values can provide a meaningful set of guideposts to orient people to what the organization will be predisposed to do as the dust forever continues to settle—but only if they have adequately sharpened teeth.

## Values with Teeth

As a consultant who works with executives to build values statements, programs, and the like, I too have struggled for ways to make these into higher-impact activities. I hope the readers of this article will take the ideas presented here, try them and add to them, and come up with their own simple tests for giving values the real teeth and meaning that they deserve in organizations.

*... it is the most "illogical" decisions that will require the most explanation and understanding for people.*