When I use a word . . . . Values

The word “values” has many meanings, including “the principles or moral standards held by a person or social group or the generally accepted or personally held judgment of what is valuable and important in life” (OED). Interviewers sometimes ask job interviewees to name the three attributes that they consider most closely reflect their values. Those who advise interviewees often suggest that they choose three items that complement each other, such as “diligent, loyal, reliable” or “honest, ethical, conscientious.” Given the difficulty in choosing just three attributes from long lists and the impossibility of accurately judging the quality of interviewees from their choices, I suggest a different approach: ask the interviewee for their opinion of a set of suggested attributes, positive or negative. Possible combinations might include “arrogant, disdainful, imperious” and “capricious, injudicious, meretricious.” UK NHS trusts are also fond of compiling and publishing lists of their organisational values, assuming that they benefit staff and the way they perform. However, a recent linguistic analysis of the organisational values of 221 NHS trusts showed that the terms “care,” “value respect,” “aspirational,” and “people” all significantly predicted increased sickness absence, while the terms “supportive” and “openness” predicted negative responses from staff. The authors concluded that “these findings should give NHS managers pause for thought, challenging them to reconsider their reliance on value-defining initiatives, and to seek evidence that a focus on values has measurable benefits on outcomes.” In short, they exhorted them, by implication, to stop advertising their organisational values.

Jeffrey K Aronson

Values

What are your values?

Perhaps they’re height 178 cm, weight 70 kg, BMI 22; lucky you.

Perhaps they’re £114k per annum with a platinum award; lucky you.

Or perhaps they’re “articulate, lucid, well spoken”; now I’m really envious.

The word “value” comes originally from an Indo-European root UAL or WAL, implying power or strength. In Latin valère meant to be strong, physically powerful or in sound health. The imperative form, valē, meant farewell, as in fare well, just as some might sign a message today with the valediction “stay safe.” Ancient writers on materia medica used valère to describe how potent medicinal compounds were. In extended uses valère also meant to have worth or to mean or signify something. The corresponding adjective and adverb, validus and valide, meant powerful/ly or vigorous/ly, or in good health, giving the noun valeutudo, good health.

All of these meanings can be seen in various English derivatives: avail, valiant, and valour, valid, validate, and validity, invalid, invalidate, and invalidity, valuable and invaluable, valetudinarian, and valency. Adding prefixes, we get words such as devalue and evaluate, ambivalent, convalescent, equivalent, prevalent, and monovalent, divalent, trivalent, tetravalent—and from Old English, via Germanic roots, we get wield.

The drug valerian, from the plant Valeriana officinalis, has been supposed to be health giving, although its efficacy in promoting sleep seems to be at best unproven. It has, of course, been used for other purposes, from at least Chaucer’s time. In his tale, the Canon’s Yeoman describes the various methods that the Canon, an alchemist, used in his trade:

“... And other useless nonsense of the sort Not worth a leek, needless to name them all; Water in rubefaction; bullock’s gall, Arsenic, brimstone, sal ammoniac, And herbs that I could mention by the sack, Moonwort, valerian, agrimony and such, Which I could number if it mattered much.”

Several proper names also come from UAL, such as Walter and names ending in -wald or the truncated forms –ald or –old: Oswald (literally God’s power), Gerald (powerful with a spear) and Reginald (a powerful judge), Arnold (eagle strength) and Harold (leader of an army). Also Valerie, Valentine, and the Russian Vladimir; perhaps there’s a hint of wishful nominal determinism in that last one, contrasting with the Ukrainian version, Volodymyr, in this case implying strength of a different kind.

As I hinted at the start of this column, the word “value” has several different meanings. Among those given in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the most usual are the material or monetary worth of something, the amount of a specified non-monetary numerical quantity, a numerical measure of a physical quantity, and a range of meanings pertinent to mathematics, music, art, linguistics, and other subjects. However, the meaning on which I want to concentrate here is the meaning of the plural form, “values,” in the sense of the principles or moral standards held by a person or social group; the generally accepted or personally held judgment of what is valuable and important in life.
Interviewees’ values

It is a long time since I was subjected to an interview for a job, but I am told that a favourite ploy of some interviewers these days is to ask their victims to sum up their attributes in three words, reflecting the values that they consider most representative of them. Incidentally, The BMJ used to do this in its interview column BMJ Confidential. Various websites list words that job interviewees might care to choose from when faced with such a question. Here’s a list compiled from items that I have seen in various places, with the more pretentious entries excluded: adaptable, ambitious, amiable, analytical, bold, calm, clever, collaborative, confident, conscientious, creative, curious, decisive, dedicated, dependable, diligent, driven, empathic, energetic, enthusiastic, ethical, extraverter, flexible, focused, friendly, high achieving, honest, imaginative, independent, inspirational, leader, loyal, methodical, meticulous, open minded, organised, patient, perceptive, persistent, personable, positive, practical, reliable, resilient, resourceful, responsible, motivated, straightforward, strategic, team player, tech savvy, tenacious, thoughtful, tough, understanding, upbeat, versatile, visionary.

So take your pick—any three. Advisory websites encourage interviewees to choose three items that complement each other: diligent, loyal, reliable, for example, or honest, ethical, conscientious. Which reminds me that I note the absence from the lists of the triad “critical, discerning, no-nonsense.” I fancy many employers would baulk at hiring someone with those attributes, even though they might be much more useful to them than those they might prefer, such as the wispy wavy set of amiable, empathic, open minded. This brings to mind a warning that many commentators have given: “Practical gentlemen hate uncertainty, balancing of probabilities, scepticism or approximation. They have a number of bitterly satirical comments on persons whose minds are so open that their brains fall out.”

Another interesting set, that with which I started this piece, articulate, lucid, well spoken, invoking items that are also missing from the usual lists, prompts a related reflection: “Don’t open your mouth so wide, or your brains may fall out.” Which invites the rejoinder “You’re in no danger of losing your brains that way. They’re not in that part of your person.”

There are obvious problems with all this. First, how can one possibly choose only three personal attributes? Secondly, how can an interviewer judge what the interviewee is like from whatever response they give? If I describe myself as, say, creative, innovative, and visionary, does that mean that I am not also, say, energetic, tenacious, thoughtful, tough, understanding, upbeat, versatile, visionary?

If interviewers must play this game, I suggest a better one. Rather than asking interviewees to describe themselves, suggest attributes to them and see how they respond, giving their reasons. That way you can also introduce negative attributes that they would never have chosen for themselves, and see what they say. How about arrogant, disdainful, imperious, or condescending, grandiose, pompous; or capricious, injudicious, meretricious?

Management values

There is also an unfortunate tendency today for institutions to declare what they perceive their values to be, because so called organisational values are widely believed to benefit staff and how they perform. NHS hospital trusts are particularly fond of doing this. Statements of the organisational values of NHS trusts typically contain items about caring, respect, and kindness; they may also talk about striving to excel, working as a team, and being compassionate.

Now this all sounds like what Americans call “motherhood and apple-pie,” defined in the OED as “something regarded as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism.” This, however, raises two questions. First, if it is all so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism, why say it at all? Secondly, perhaps it isn’t unquestionably good and does in fact need criticism.

And criticism is in fact what it has recently received, in the shape of a study of the stated organisational values of 221 NHS trusts. The authors of the study collected data on trusts’ values (from their websites), indicators of performance (Summary Hospital-level Mortality Indicator statistics), Care Quality Commission (CQC) ratings, sickness absence rates, and staff opinions (NHS Staff Survey responses). They characterised the stated values based on their lexical properties and then undertook semantic analysis, using Google’s Universal Sentence Encoder. They discovered 12 common themes, which they then tested for associations with trusts’ outcomes.

Briefly, and the paper repays close reading, they found no association between themes and indicators of performance or CQC ratings. However, the themes did predict trusts’ sickness absence rates, but not in the way that the trusts might have expected. In fact, the terms “caring,” “value respect,” “aspirational,” and “people” all significantly predicted increased sickness absence. The themes also predicted staff opinions on “equality, diversity, and inclusion,” and the terms “supportive” and “openness” predicted more negative responses. It appears that not only are staff not taken in by stated organisational values; they don’t trust the trusts.

The authors concluded that the adoption of organisational values by NHS trusts does not seem to make a positive difference to its patients or staff. Pointedly, they added that “these findings should give NHS managers pause for thought, challenging them to reconsider their reliance on value-defining initiatives, and to seek evidence that a focus on values has measurable benefits on outcomes.” If managers pause, as advised, they should do so for long enough to realise that they should abandon the use of organisational values.

Envoi

It puzzles me that so many NHS trusts, whose business is healthcare, should consider it necessary to state among their values that they care. Protest too much suggests that the opposite may be true.

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