

Defining Your Values

For a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling career



What are values?

Values are our own personal reference guide for the way we need to live and work in order to be happy.

They are our internal markers for what is good, beneficial, important, useful, desirable and constructive for us.

Values underpin our sense of right and wrong or what "ought" to be and are the criteria by which we judge ourselves, our life and the world around us.

Unique to each individual, values are part of our personal make up and tend not to change too much beyond our mid-twenties.

Why do values matter?

Values are important because they (should) drive us from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep.

When the choices we make and the way we behave match our values, life is usually good – we feel a sense of purpose, satisfaction and contentment. But when they don't align with our values, things feel out of kilter, unfulfilling and often downright unhappy.

How do values impact work-related choices?

From a work perspective, value conflicts in a chosen career path or work environment can present big roadblocks to fulfilment and happiness.

Imagine that you value harmony, but regularly face conflict at work? Or that you value family but have to put in 70-hour weeks? What if being creative is intrinsic to you but your organisation doesn't value new ideas? Or that you value integrity but your sales role requires you to 'massage' the truth about company products or services?

The result will be internal stress and conflict. It might leave you feeling lost or rudderless, angry, uncomfortable, disengaged or exhausted.

You'll almost certainly feel dissatisfied and wistful about a role that could be meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling.

How can values can help you?

Values should underpin every major and minor decision you ever make – in both work and life. If they do, those decisions are highly likely to be the right ones for you.

By identifying and understanding your values you can make plans and decisions that honour them, using them as a simple reference guide to help you make choices about how to live your life.

Career-wise, values can help you answer questions like:

- Why am I unhappy in my job?
- Does the root of the problem lie with the career path itself, or in a work environment factor?
- What type of career and working environment are right for me?

- Should I start my own business?
- Should I accept this promotion?
- Should I hold firm or compromise on my position?

Working out and truly understanding your values is the single most powerful thing you can do for yourself. By setting values-driven priorities, you can determine the best direction for you, your career path and your life.

Identifying your values

Take a look at the list of example values below. These are intended as a starter for-ten so do not feel compelled to choose any of these words. You can pick any word you like that you feel rightfully describes any of your values. If you see a word that almost resonates, but not quite, go with a better description that means something to you.

Simply take some time to review the list and choose between five to eight values that reflect what's most important to you. There is no right or wrong answer and no right number. You can list more than eight if you like. I use eight as it's a workable number, especially when it comes to prioritising your values in a later exercise.

Try not to overthink it or judge what you think you 'should' have on your values list versus what you really feel. *Feel* is the important word here. Your first level, gut response is usually spot-on.

Sample core values

Authenticity
Bravery
Commitment
Community
Connection
Creativity
Diversity
Equality
Fairness
Family
Forgiveness
Freedom
Fun
Gratitude
Growth

Happiness
Health
Humour
Humility
Honesty
Integrity
Justice
Kindness
Knowledge
Leadership
Love
Nurturing
Open-mindedness
Passion
Patience
Peace
Persistence
Positivity
Prudence
Self-control
Service
Significance
Security
Spirituality
Stability
Trust

Identifying your anti-values

Once you have an initial list of values, take a look at the list of anti-values below and repeat the exercise, aiming for between five to eight. The same rules apply in choosing any words you like and going with your gut instinct.

Anti-values are, as you might expect, the antithesis of your values.

They are your internal markers for what is bad, detrimental, irrelevant, useless, undesirable and destructive for you. They underpin your sense of what's wrong for yourself, your life and the world around you.

There are two good reasons for defining your anti-values.

The first is that some people find it much easier to identify what they can't abide versus what needs to be intrinsic to the way that they live. So if you have struggled with the first exercise try this one and then use your list to consider the opposites for each anti-value as a potential value for you.

The second is that you can use your anti-values as a check list to ensure nothing obvious is missing from your values list. Simply consider what the opposite is to each anti-value and check that it is reflected somewhere on your values list.

Sample anti-values

Aggression

Anger

Anxiety

Apathy

Arrogance

Betrayal

Brutality

Conflict

Contempt

Cynicism

Death

Dishonesty

Disgust

Fear

Frivolity

Greed

Hate

Hypocrisy

Ill health

Infidelity

Immorality

Injustice

Isolation
 Jealousy
 Laziness
 Pain
 Pomposity
 Poverty
 Procrastination
 Stress
 Suspicion
 Worry

Articulating what your values really mean to you

Value descriptors can mean different things to different people. For example, *Connection* might mean a strong appreciation of one-to-one relationships with family and friends to one person, but a wider sense of connection with the environment, animals and people to another.

There are no right or wrong answers. The nuances are important and worth articulating to provide a clear understanding of how your values manifest themselves for you.

With this in mind, take your list of values and write down examples of what each means to you. What does each value look like? How does it play out? How does it show itself? Take some time to be as descriptive as you can.

Below is an example. Remember, if you have any of these values they might look quite different for you.

Value	Explanation
Health	Putting the breaks on. Listening to your body. Being kind and honest with yourself about your physical limitations.
Commitment	Do what you say you are going to do and do the best job you can. Don't give in. Find a way around things. See things through.
Trust	Reliability. Being certain that you can trust someone and their integrity. Trusting people to be there for you and vice versa.

Once you have articulated your values, repeat the exercise for your anti-values. This is particularly useful for understanding why you find certain life or career situations, or people difficult. It will undoubtedly be because they are compromising your values in some way and/or embodying your anti-values.

Prioritising your values

Determining the hierarchy of your values will help provide an ever stronger steer when making decisions that are best aligned to who you really are and what matters most to you.

This step requires making comparisons, one at a time, between two of your values.

Once again, rely on your gut feel when asking yourself: if I had to choose between these two values, which of them *feels* more important to me?

Try not to over analyse your response. Listen to your instinct and simply write down what comes up. You can always revisit your prioritised list and make changes at any time.

Below is a working example:

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Write down your original list of values, in no particular order	Compare the first two values and put the most important value first	Take the third value and compare it with the one at the top of the list. If it is more important put it at the top. If it isn't, compare it to the next value on the list and put it above or below that value as appropriate	Take the fourth value and repeat the exercise, comparing it with the value at the top of the list. If it is more important put it at the top. If it isn't, compare it to the next value on the list. Put it above that value if it is more important, or move to the next value and test it there. Keep going until you find the right place for it.	Repeat the exercise for all the values on your list until you have a full prioritised list
Connection Joy Peace Freedom Creativity Trust Growth Open-mindedness	Joy Connection	Peace Joy Connection	Peace Joy Freedom Connection	Peace Joy Freedom Connection Open-mindedness Trust Growth Creativity

Once complete, put your list away and don't look at it for at least 24 to 48 hours. Then revisit it with fresh eyes and see what your initial gut reaction is to your list and the order of your values.

Ask yourself:

- Does the list feel right?
- Do these values sum you up as a person?
- Do they make you feel good about yourself?
- Would you be comfortable and proud to share your values with the people you trust?

At this stage, feel free to move your values around if something feels out of kilter, or add a value that you realise on reflection is missing.

Putting your values into action

Now that you have a clear, prioritised list of values you can start to consider them in your career and life decision making.

Any time that you make choices based on your values, you can approach those decisions with confidence and clarity. You'll also know that what you're doing is best for your current and future fulfilment and happiness.

Even if at times you make a choice to compromise a value for a specific reason, you'll be making the decision consciously and can prepare for any resulting feelings or reactions.

Making value-based choices may not always be easy, but making a choice that you know is right for you will serve you much better in the long run.

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About the author



Alison O'Leary is a [certified Martha Beck life coach](#), specialised in career coaching.

She has amassed thousands of hours coaching, training and mentoring individuals, combining insights from corporate and personal coaching work to help people find a way to a career that is meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling.

If you would like to explore hiring Alison to coach you one-on-one or speak to your organisation you can do so by visiting [Live True](#).