



The Top 5 Tips for Understanding your Values

Background to Values

Values help us define what is important to us. Sue Knight in her book 'NLP at Work' (2002 2nd Ed., Nicholas Brealey Publishing) shows the link between our values and beliefs: 'Our beliefs function in the form of values against which we make decisions throughout our life' (page 215). Steve Andreas and Charles Faulkner in their book 'NLP The New Technology of Achievement' (1994, Nicholas Brealey Publishing) go further and say that 'what we value determines what life means to us, what actions we will take, what we will move toward or away from' (page 67). In coaching we often explore values with people to look at issues such as conflict, motivation or in goal setting. By understanding what is important (and I mean really important) to clients, you can raise their awareness of exactly how they might move forward in their life or work.

This guide outlines one way of exploring peoples' values with them. You might ask why we need guidance on achieving this, surely people just know what is important to them? Actually, what we find time and time again is that people do not always know what they want, values are not always held at a conscious level and a mechanism to guide and prompt that awareness can be incredibly valuable.

1. Ask yourself what is important in ...? (e.g. work, health, relationships)

This might sound a very obvious place to start and it is absolutely the first question to ask. Be specific about the context in which you wish to elicit your values (and it is a good idea over time to elicit values across all the main areas of your life) and ask the question for that context.

What you will find are that your values are different across different contexts and also that your values will change over time, with maturity and following any significant change work within the coaching process.

So - Ask yourself:

‘What is important in my work (*or health, relationship etc*) ...’

‘What do I look for in ...’

‘What do I want from ...’

Tip: Remember to state what is important NOW – not how you would like them to be, or how you feel they should be.

2. Ask ‘What else?’

Once you have generated a list (which you should record in the exact words that come to mind), just pause and ask yourself ‘what else?’ You may be surprised at how many other values come to mind at this stage and also how important some of them are, despite them not being the ones which first came into your thoughts.

Another good question to get even more values on your list is to ask yourself ‘if you had all of this in work (*or in your health, or in your relationship*) what would make you leave (*or be concerned, or walk away*)?’

Remember to record any values, which come to your mind in the exact words as they arise.

3. Consider asking someone to help you to elicit your values

Some people find it helpful to get someone else to ask these questions and to record the answers. This allows space to concentrate on the questions and really listen to what is arising internally.

Someone else asking the questions, also allows that extra push to ask ‘anything else?’ beyond which you might not have gone if you had done this alone.

4. Put your values in order of priority

Once you have a comprehensive list of values in any context and you are sure there are no more values to bring into your awareness, ask yourself ‘which is THE most important one on the list?’

Write yourself a new list in order of importance.

If you are considering between two values, be strict with yourself and consider which one you would choose if you could ONLY have ONE.

Once you have repeated this across several contexts you will establish which values are ‘core values’ (i.e. exist across all contexts) and which are context specific, which gives an even greater potential to the work you can do with this insight.

5. Using your values list

Once you have your values list you may well find that an issue related to the context becomes clear. For example, if you were eliciting values in a work context and you were doing this because you were in some way dissatisfied at work, you may realize from this exercise that one of your most important values at work is not being met (for example challenge, variety or integrity). Having this awareness then gives you the new options as to what you can do to ensure that value is met (or to change your work context in order for it to be met). Can you get those values met in your current work place? What would you have to do differently to get those met?

You can take values work to an even higher level, by asking for each one why that value is important. By exploring this to at least two or three levels of importance for each value (i.e. by continuing to ask why is THAT important to you), you can do some great work regarding motivation in terms of what it is about that value which motivates you. In NLP terminology this is what we call the Criteria Equivalents and this links in with work on ‘Towards’ and ‘Away From ‘ motivations, which you can read more about in Andreas and Faulkner (NLP The New Technology of Achievement, 1994).

Exploring values is a great addition to any coaching relationship. Andreas and Faulkner (1994) say that ‘the most common way of becoming aware of your values occurs when they are violated’ (page 92), just think how such discomfort could be minimized, or avoided completely, by being aware of your values and recognizing any incongruence before any major violation can occur.

In addition it is worth remembering that your values are the keys to your motivation – if you want to live life to the full and know you are fulfilling your unique purpose in life, find out what your values are and live to meet them fully at every opportunity.

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