

SENIOR CONSULTANT

The Voice of the Investment Management Consultant

Are Your Values Keeping You From Doing What's Right?

Mike Hernacki, Manager, A-Level Alliance

These days we hear a lot about values. Terms like “family values,” “values-based selling” and “values-based education” suggest that if we simply follow our values, we’ll be doing the right things. But is that really so?

Take the Taliban, for example. These people have an extremely strong value system. So deeply do they believe in their values, they feel justified in torturing, even killing anyone who doesn’t live according to them. In our country, the Ku Klux Klan has for generations espoused a value system it claims is based on the Holy Bible and long-held Christian traditions. Few of us would agree that either the Taliban or the KKK are doing what’s right. Yet, if they’re acting in accordance with their values, where have they gone wrong?

The answer lies in a fundamental difference between two terms: values and principles. People with a strong set of values tend to believe that their system is superior to all others. They often point to the fact that these values were taught to them by parents, teachers and even clergymen.

What they neglect to do, however, is to question or test their value system to see if it is in conflict with universal laws or principles.

What “Values” and “Principles” Really Mean

We need to define some terms here. “Values” are the customs, beliefs, ideals and institutions which a society, a group, or even an individual, hold in high regard and often vary from culture to culture. Values can be positive, such as cleanliness, patriotism and family unity – or negative, such as cruelty, prejudice and suppression, although the people who hold such negative values would not use those words. The mistake many people make is believing that because a particular value is theirs, it’s automatically positive or good. A classic example of this belief is contained in the old saying, “My country, right or wrong.”

On the other hand, principles are universal truths – proven laws which apply in every conceivable circumstance. Principles are neither right nor wrong, good nor

bad. They just are. The most obvious physical principle we deal with every day is gravity. The law of gravity is present everywhere and is in effect 100% of the time. Gravity works the same, all over the world, no matter who uses it. Gravity is not a bad thing, even if it causes a child to fall and get hurt. Nor is it a good thing because it keeps that same child from floating away and getting lost.

If you do not value the law of gravity, you can choose to ignore it. Trouble is that that could get you killed, especially if you happen to ignore it while walking near a cliff. But if you understand gravity – or any other universal principle – you can use it to your advantage.

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When Values and Principles Conflict

Bruce Wright, an internationally acclaimed author and business consultant, has written and spoken much on this subject. He points out, “Some people hold onto their value system so strongly, they refuse to recognize its flaws, even when it directly conflicts

with universal laws or principles.” For an example of this, Wright suggests we look at the Taliban again. Their value system includes hundreds of restrictions on personal freedom, including laws against women showing their faces in public or talking openly with men other than their husbands.

“These restrictions violate the universal principal of self-selection,” Wright explains. “This principle is also known as free will or personal choice. Throughout history, countless religious and political groups have tried to force people to comply with a dictatorial belief system or set of moral values.”

This rarely works, Wright observes, and usually doesn’t last very long. People might tolerate restriction for a while, especially if they believe it will serve a more important purpose. Eventually they will ignore the imposed values or rebel against them, deposing those in power.

We saw that when the Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan. Women quickly threw off their face coverings and began conversing in public with

whomever they chose. Mind you, not all of them made the change. Many kept to the old restrictions, but they did it by choice, once again validating the principle of self-selection.

Other Principles That Guide Our Lives

We've seen how the principle of gravity works in the physical world and how self-selection shows up in society. In his book, *Macro Strategic Planning™ Your Life and Business*, Bruce Wright identifies and explains other principles we can use to our advantage in our business and personal lives. These are:

- Self-Discovery, in which people learn for themselves what their best choices are
- Win-Win, where all parties involved in a relationship come out ahead
- Interdependence – beyond independence, working with competent partners
- Other Messengers – getting advice or referrals from more than one source

The same principles that work in people's personal lives also work universally in business applications. In fact, in every area of human relationships, the application of these principles produces better outcomes than many values-based alternatives that are in conflict with universal laws. The good news is that each and every one of us gets to choose whether to emphasize universal principles or self-determined values.

But why do so many people seem to resist a principle-based behavioral system? Could it be because the path of less resistance requires less effort? It's much easier to make up your own version of rules to live by (values) than it is to find and implement proven universal laws (principles).

What Do You Live By: Values or Principles?

Some people reject the very idea that such things as principles or universal truths exist at all. If you're one of them, consider this. As with gravity, all universal laws, principles and truths are in effect and at work in your business and

personal life, whether you realize and admit it or not. You can deny gravity, you can resent it, you can hate it – but you can't make it disappear.

Now, here's a little exercise. Applying the new understanding of principles vs. values that you have just acquired, ask yourself which you are using in your personal life and professional practice. Here a few examples of such questions:

- When your children question why you are making them do something, do you reply, "Because I said so, and I'm the parent"? (Obeying one's parents is a value, but what is the principle behind what you're asking the child to do?)
- Do you vote for a candidate just because they happen to be in the same political party you are, even if you know little or nothing about what their positions are on the issues? (This is similar to "My country, right or wrong.")
- In your career, have you ever made a sale, focusing more on your commission than on the product's long-term value for the client? (This violates the principle of "win-win.")

After an honest look, can you say you're living by objective, proven principles or by subjective, belief-based values? Dr. Mark Goulston, a Los Angeles-based psychiatrist and author of *Get Out of Your Own Way*, says, "Where there is a way, you can usually find the will." The challenging path toward a better life and business is before you. The will to follow it is up to you. Apply the principle of self-selection and see what results. ■

About the Author

A former attorney, financial consultant and business writer, Mike Hernacki is currently a success coach, working with people who want a better life and business. The author of several self-help books, Mike lives in San Diego where he is also the manager of the A-Level Alliance, a synergistic group of expert professionals. Mike can be reached at 800-919-2757 or via email (mhernacki@a-levelalliance.com).

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