

July 2023

Values-Based Communication

How Leading With Values Can Power
Your Organization



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary | 03 |
| Introduction | 08 |
| Values-Based Communication | 14 |
| I. Knowing Your Values | 15 |
| II. Living Your Values | 20 |
| III. Communicating Your Values to Yourself | 25 |
| IV. Communicating Your Values to Others | 29 |
| Conclusion | 34 |

Written by Jessie Landerman & Steven Lawrence

Key contributors – Kate Emmons, Judy Ney, Helen Sacco,
Claire Schultz, Susan Wolfson

Executive Summary

All organizations – whether funders, nonprofit service providers, or advocates, large or small, or focused locally, nationally, or internationally—have values that are operationalized and communicated every day. These values may or may not be formally articulated or even align with mission and vision, yet they shape all interactions and can serve either to advance goals or, to unintentionally undermine them.

TCC Group’s focus on values reflects growing acknowledgment across the nonprofit and philanthropic sector that we must collectively marshal every resource possible to counter systemic inequity and injustice, climate catastrophe, rising authoritarianism, and other threats to the wellbeing of individuals and societies globally.

Responding to today’s myriad complex challenges requires organizations to work both internally and externally. They need to build relational capacity and forge collaborations that ensure diverse stakeholders engage meaningfully

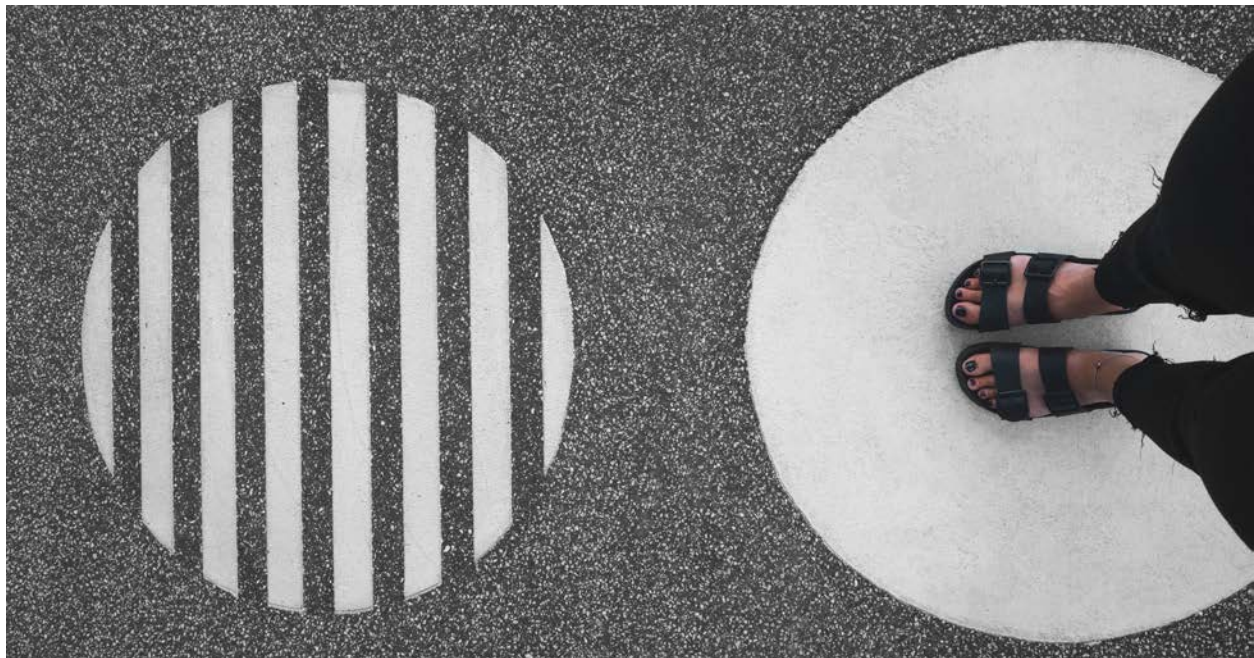


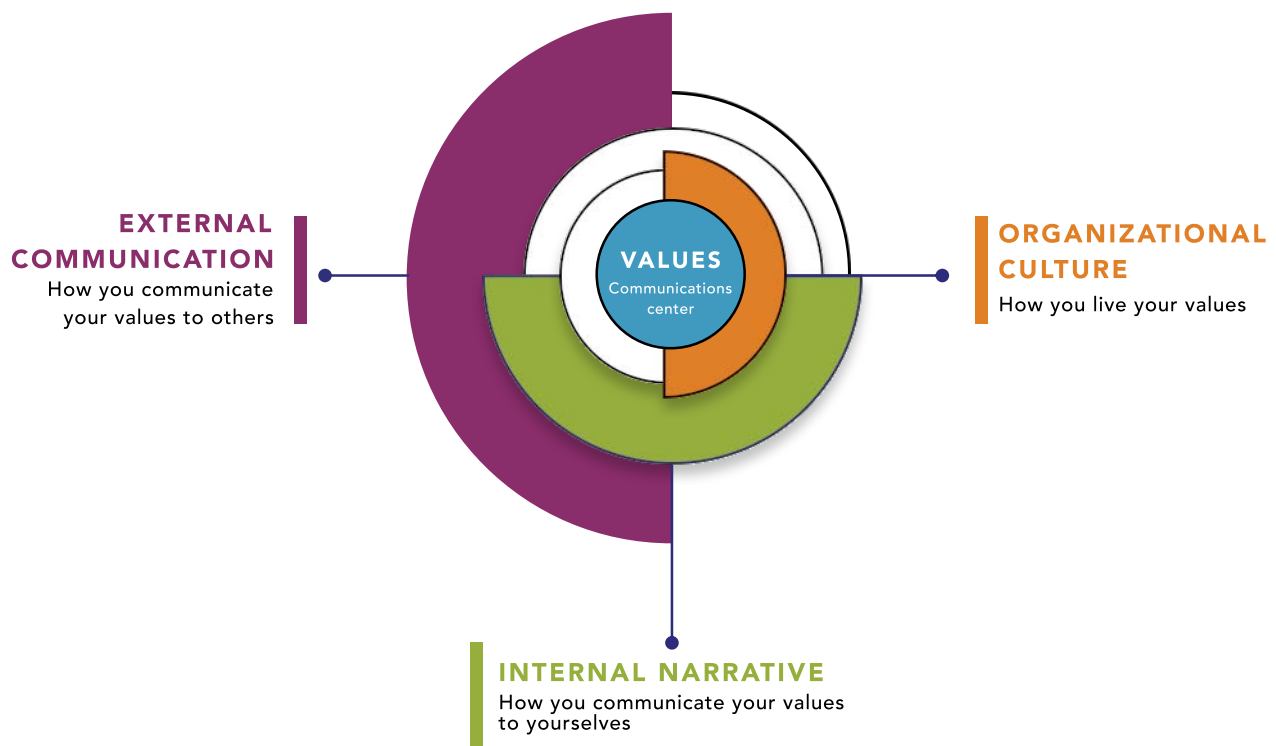
and act collectively to expand their reach, impact, and accountability, while also reaching inward to generate clarity, passion, and motivation among staff, board members, and other partners. TCC Group created *Values-Based Communication: How Leading With Values Can Power Your Organization* to explore how centering our work and communications on an organization's values can strengthen the organization and address these challenges.

The following steps are a starting point for considering how an organization can communicate its values clearly and consistently through its actions, statements, and decisions.

TCC Group wrote this brief as a resource and guide to:

- Determine how to identify an organization's values and reconcile competing values.
- Consider what it means for an organization to "live" its values.
- Assess ways to communicate an organization's values both externally and internally.





Knowing Your Values

Every organization should identify a core set of organizational values of foundational importance that are, or should be, guiding all work and communications. They are the ideals or principles that organizations consider most important and will draw on to carry out their mission and pursue their vision. A formalized set of values should reflect what an organization is when at its best, which we define as the space between what an organization is and can accomplish now and what it aspires to be.

At their core, these values will embody your organization's

shared ambitions and commitments.

An organization that knows its values does not require leadership and staff to rigidly repeat a set of words or phrases. Rather, there is a shared understanding and vocabulary, coupled with consistency in the values that are emphasized.

Living Your Values

Nothing undermines individual or organizational credibility faster than espousing one set of values while practicing another. For this reason, stated values must be rooted in an organization's current "best self," rather than simply listing what staff want the organization to be or think

externally, and how it should be. When an organization's values have been identified, the priority becomes having those values consistently come to life beyond a few aspirational words on websites.

Being intentional about organizational values means examining internal structures and doing the hard work of developing authentic buy-in across the organization. For values to have the most meaning, everyone within the organization—from the program assistant to the CEO and board—should feel a shared responsibility for stewarding these values. This necessitates giving staff the space to respectfully question decisions and processes that they perceive as not aligned with the organization's values.

For an organization that lives its values, daily interactions will reinforce those values. There may also be unique milestones to revisit, such as in the context of a leadership transition or when addressing an external (or internal) crisis. If a value appears to be outside the ability to live up to it, the organization may need to consider what it would take to make the value “livable,” or determine whether to continue centering that value.

Communicating Your Values to Yourself

To live and communicate an organization's values, it is essential to be purposeful in communicating them internally. Because organizations do this through their actions in

addition to their words, values should be centered in all formal and informal communication among leadership and staff.

Of equal importance is communicating values through the organizational structure. Dissonance between the values that guide the work externally and how work is actually taking place internally will undoubtedly lead to discontent and a questioning of values commitment among staff. Organizations must be prepared to consider how all of their internal practices are fully reflective of their values.

Communicating Your Values to Others

Because each organization is unique in its specific needs and priorities, public-facing communications should be tailored to specific values, approaches, and goals.

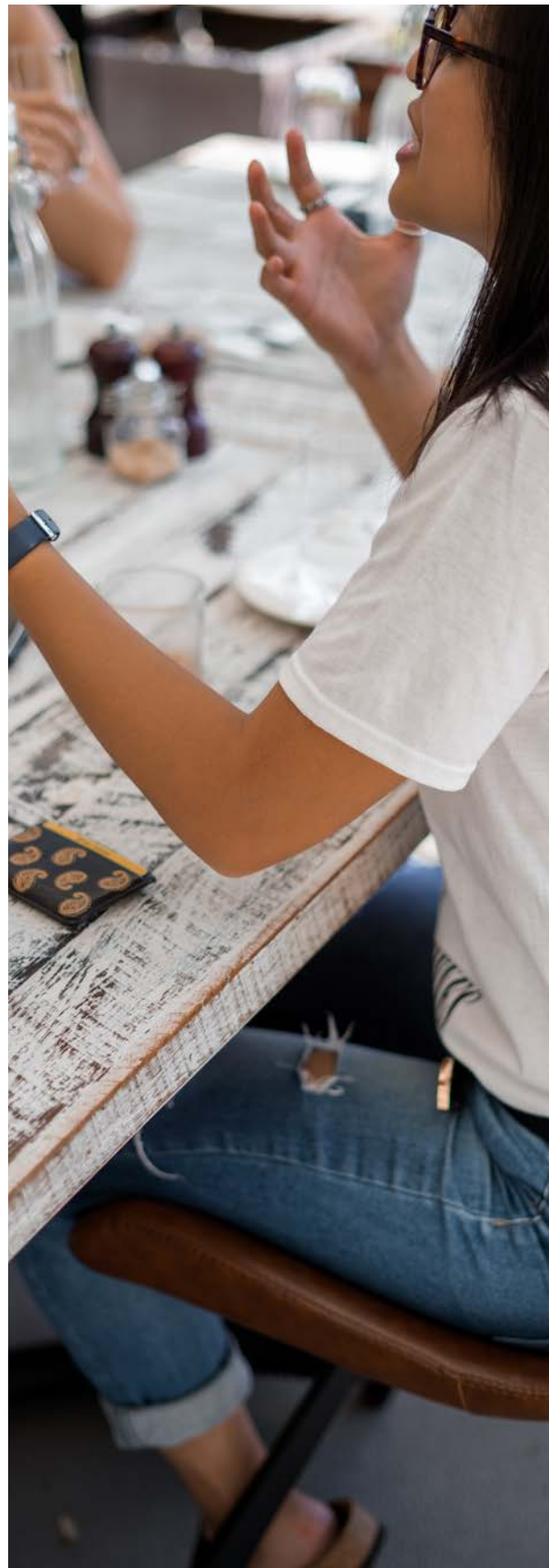
Several general recommendations can help to guide organizations in communicating their values most effectively with external constituencies. Of primary importance is centering the values in strategic and communications plans and sharing them clearly, consistently, and frequently in meetings, written communications, and presentations. This can often be done most effectively through engaging stories and images that bring values and their impact to life. Having stakeholders tell their own stories about the organization's values can be especially powerful. Of course, with all of these communications, remember to think

critically about the implicit values that may be conveyed along with any explicitly stated values.

Building a consistent, powerful voice and story rooted in values that can be shared by all staff members helps organizations speak to many constituencies. At the same time, staff should have the flexibility to express the organization's values in ways that will be meaningful to engaging and motivating their many different clients, partners, and audiences. Saying “We value compassion in all we do” may resonate with one audience. “We care and we listen to you” may better communicate this value to another.

Leading with Your Values

This primer alone will not make organizations become values-centered in their work and communication. But it can shine a light on the way their values are already being communicated through their work and help them to decide if they are ready to engage their full power.





Introduction

Values-Based Communication



this
must be
the place

Introduction

The Strength of Your Values

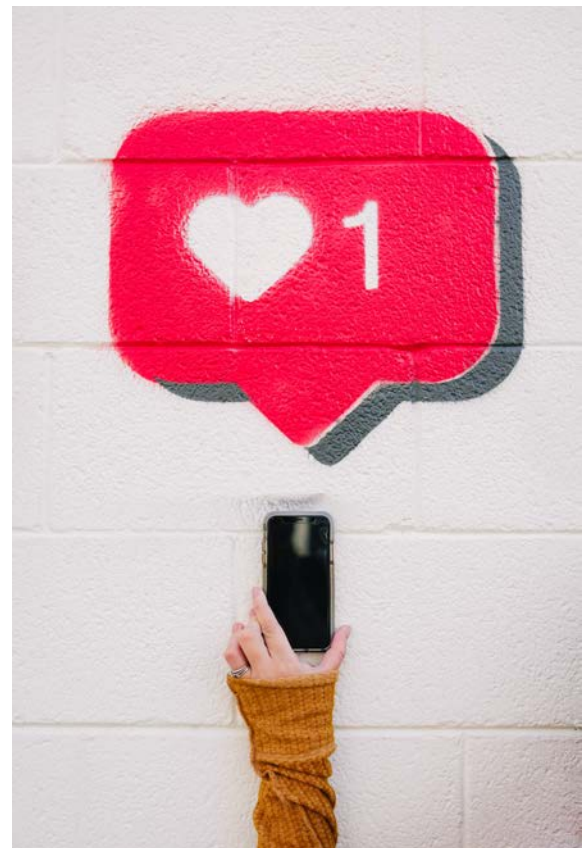
Consider two hypothetical environmental organizations with mission statements seeking to support conservation and biodiversity, and which articulate visions of a world where all forms of life can flourish. One of these organizations pursues its objectives by securing funds to buy land and communicates with its supporters about the number of acres acquired and types of species protected.

The other organization pursues its mission by partnering with environmentally impacted communities to create and implement local biodiversity action plans. Progress is measured in terms of local leadership development and executed plans.

While both organizations value the environment and may even have similar values statements on their websites, only one of these organizations intentionally leads with what it considers to be of essential importance in its planning, implementation, and communication—its values.

Whether developing strategies internally, engaging with partners, or describing its work to potential supporters, the latter organization consistently lifts up its values of respect, inclusivity, and sustainability. These values are embodied in the organization’s collaborative approach to internal decision-making and in how it embraces the leadership of community partners in achieving its mission. Communication with supporters uses metrics judiciously and instead emphasizes how the organization’s values simultaneously help to strengthen communities and advance conservation and biodiversity. Internal evaluations center how deeply staff are embodying the organization’s values in their work alongside other key milestones.

Yet, given that both organizations are financially viable, why should it matter whether they are living and communicating their values in everything they do?





TCC Group is not the first to raise this question, and previous research has demonstrated that leading with values can connect an organization’s objectives with those it is seeking to inform, enroll, and persuade.¹ But TCC Group’s focus on values in a previous **blog** and now in this brief reflects growing acknowledgment across the nonprofit and philanthropic sector that each organization must engage every resource possible to counter systemic inequity and injustice, climate catastrophe, rising authoritarianism, and other threats to the wellbeing of individuals and societies globally.

Responding to today’s myriad complex challenges requires organizations to work both internally and externally. They need to build **relational capacity** and forge collaborations that ensure diverse stakeholders engage meaningfully and act collectively to expand their reach, impact, and

¹ For example, see Mullen, R., *Communicating Values: A Values-Led Approach to Strategic Communication for Social Change*, Values Lab, 2018.

accountability, while also reaching inward to generate clarity, passion, and motivation among staff, board members, and other partners. We believe that centering an organization's values offers the most holistic approach available for doing just that.

Values-Based Communication: How Leading With Values Can Power Your Organizations explores how centering their work and communication on values enables organizations to strengthen their bonds with those they serve and those who support them, while nurturing cohesion among staff. In fact, part of communicating an organization's values to the world is living them.

Informed by TCC Group's more than 40 years of supporting mission-driven organizations, *Values-Based Communication* offers a starting place for considering how adopting a values-centered approach can strengthen our organizations, communication, relationships, and more.

Of course, this primer alone will not make organizations values-centered in their work and communication, but it can help illustrate how their values are already being communicated through their work and whether they are ready to engage the full power of their values.

The Psychology of Leading With Values

Values can be an entry point or a roadblock to engagement. When presented with new information, our biases kick in and we tend to shut out or ignore information that challenges our identities or conflicts with our values. Conversely, we are more likely to take in information if we feel that it aligns with our beliefs or is delivered by someone to whom we can relate.

Does this mean we can only communicate with or mobilize people with whom we share a common identity and dominant beliefs? Absolutely not. Research suggests that across all cultures and countries, people possess the same spectrum of values, which group into nine meta-categories: universalism, benevolence, conformity and tradition, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation and excitement, and self-direction. Organizations simply need to engage people around the values they already hold.

Of course, among these universally held values, some are more conducive to promoting equity, social change, and social action than others. When “equity values” like universalism and benevolence are activated,

people are more likely to donate time or money to a cause and less likely to act in a discriminatory manner.

It follows that through communications, organizations should activate these values to motivate action. This means reminding people of the value of cooperation and equity and helping them believe a better future is possible and worth the fight. However, communication alone may not be enough to override other priorities or circumstances.

Fortunately, values operate like muscles and are strengthened by repetition. As the saying goes, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Decades of research, though perhaps less poetically framed, proves this point. Values trigger emotions, and emotions are linked to memory. How an organization makes others feel will determine whether they remember what was said—and whether they are willing to listen in the first place.²

² Ibid.

Values-Based Communication

- I. Knowing Your Values
- II. Living Your Values
- III. Communicating Your Values to Yourself
- IV. Communicating Your Values to Others



Knowing Your Values

Personal values are the fundamental principles and beliefs that help to evaluate behavior, people, and events.³ Core values such as equality, competition, trust, independence, and honor are as varied as the individuals who hold them and play a key role in guiding choices and demonstrating the difference between right and wrong.

All organizations—funders, nonprofit service providers, advocates, large or small, focused locally, nationally, or internationally—have values that are being operationalized and communicated every day, whether or not they have been formally articulated or align with mission and vision. In fact, unexamined values could unintentionally undermine the stated goals of an organization.

Looking back at the two hypothetical environmental organizations described earlier, the first organization



³ See Schwartz, S.H., “Are There Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?,” *Journal of Social Science Issues*, 1994.

communicates values emphasizing the protection of physical resources for the benefit of all living things. The second organization communicates values centering on respect for individuals and the lands they occupy, with the goal of achieving sustainability. Leveraging the power of values requires both organizations to be clear about the values that guide their work and communication.

What are your values?

In our work helping organizations consider the ways in which their values are currently being centered in their approaches, we at TCC Group are often struck by the response we receive to the most basic question:

What are your organization's values? With rare exceptions, what we hear back are recitations of an organization's mission or vision statements.

Mission and vision statements are not values. Rather, a mission statement describes the purpose of an organization, and a vision statement states what that organization hopes to accomplish. By comparison, values are far more

fundamental; they identify the deeply held ideals or principles an organization considers most important and intends to follow while carrying out its mission and seeking to achieve its visions. Values embody aspirations and commitments, and connect directly to emotions.



Ideally, the process of identifying an organization's values happens in tandem with the development of its mission and vision statements, as both of these resources should reflect its values. For many organizations, it is likely that there is a mission and vision, but without the benefit of a full values articulation process.

If this is the case, there are several possible approaches. One way to begin is to ask selected members of leadership and staff to identify independently what they believe to be the organization's values, focusing on what the organization is when it's at its best (and avoiding what leadership and staff *want*

it to be or think it *should* be). Another approach is to employ “storytelling” questions about why team members were attracted to the organization, or moments they felt most proud, and then identify the core values at the root of their experience.

Similarly, key internal stakeholders could be asked to identify and reflect upon moments when values showed up in communication, decision-making, activities, or internal structures. Findings from this initial querying can then be shared back in the context of facilitated discussions to help to see what language resonates, to reconcile discrepancies, and to agree upon a shared set of organizational values.



Must you all agree on your values?

In an ideal world, there would be complete clarity and alignment around what leadership and staff consider to be their organization's values. In reality, environments are constantly evolving, and each individual brings an interpretation of what values like respect and equity mean to them. While an aligned outcome is important, so is the rich, illuminating, and potentially transformational process of identifying an organization's values.

During this process, it is critical to have conversations across teams *and* across hierarchies within the organization. This enables optimal learning and shared buy-in and can help achieve clarity on when and why perceptions of organizational values may differ. An inclusive participant selection process and the intentional engagement of staff in eliciting input and feedback will go a long way in establishing values that reflect

the organization's authenticity, while also demonstrating its commitment to living them.

Most importantly, an organization's values cannot be top-down. Leadership may have strong beliefs about their organization's fundamental values, but there will be little impact on fulfilling its mission and visions if staff do not experience those values as connected to the work they are doing.

It is okay if this process does not result in precise alignment around all of the values ascribed to the organization, because values statements are not meant to be perfect. Rather, they should balance being aspirational with being both true and livable. Most important is that there achieving a shared agreement across the organization on a core set of values, which both leadership and staff will emphasize in their work and communication. Done with care and respect, this process of balancing voices can lead to greater understanding and an overall strengthening of the organization.

Do you have just one set of values?

There is no "right" number of values and no need for all of an organization's values to be equally relevant to all areas of activity. Depending on their size or scope, organizations may have a handful or an array of values that receive differing levels of prioritization depending on goals and context. This may mean communicating and developing programming around certain values to build bridges and common ground with stakeholders with whom those values resonate, or emphasizing particular values in specific areas of their strategic plan.

For example, a large educational organization that delivers in-person learning and also engages in advocacy may have overarching values of equity, inclusion, and rigor. Importantly, these values are mutually

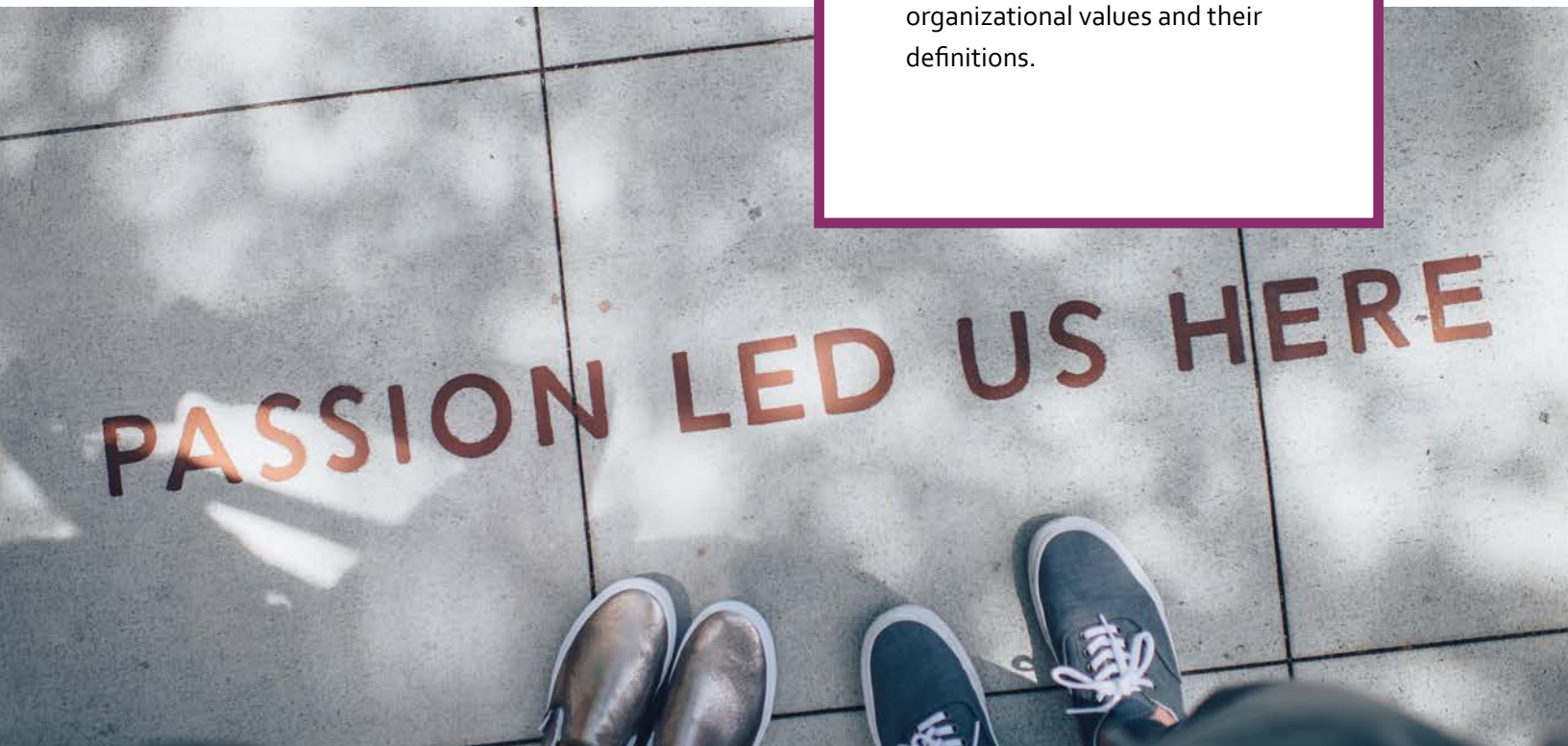


reinforcing. In its development and delivery of in-person learning, the organization may lead with its value of inclusion and actively seek ways to better embody it. This would be operationalized by engaging learners in curriculum development and testing, as well as utilizing co-educators, all while being explicit in communication about the value of inclusion.

Through its advocacy work, the organization may lead with its value of equity and seek to advance the goal of ensuring that all learners have access to tailored and effective educational resources. While this work would likely be inclusive, communicating around equity may be more relevant for its goals. In both cases, a fundamental commitment to the value of rigor would be evident.

Knowing Your Values Action Steps

- Have leadership and staff identify independently what they believe to be their organization's current and aspirational values.
- Employ “storytelling” questions about why they were attracted to the organization and then identifying core values at the root of their experience.
- Share back in facilitated discussions to see what language resonates.
- Agree upon a shared set of organizational values and their definitions.



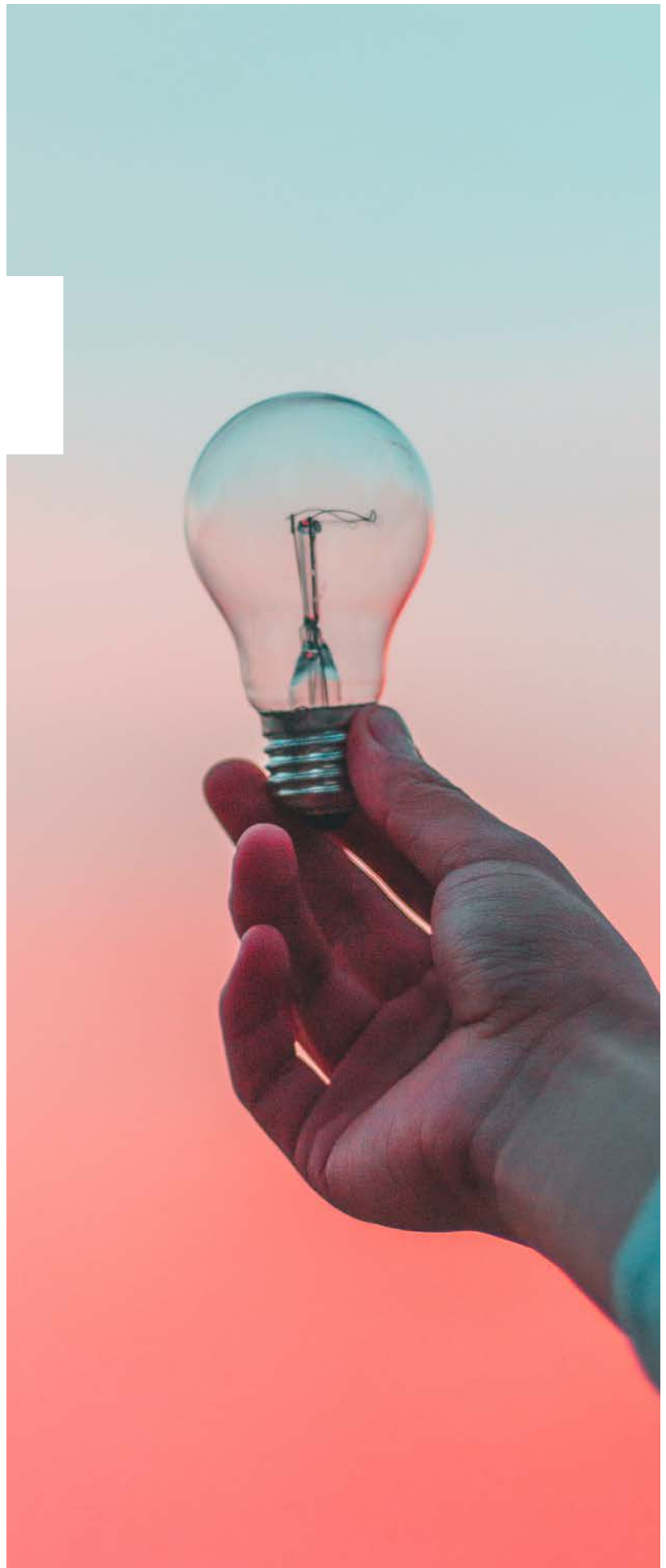


Living Your Values

Many people give little thought to the values that shape their engagement with the larger world, but they are inextricably interwoven with emotions and decision-making processes and tend to come to front of mind only during times of crisis or when a tough decision needs to be made. Organizations cannot afford this luxury. While they too may look to their values to solve problems, they are just as important during periods of “normalcy.”

What does it mean to “live your values”?

“Walk the talk” exists as an aphorism in our society for good reason. Nothing undermines individual or organizational credibility faster than espousing one set of values while practicing another. The preceding section explored the process of identifying and agreeing upon an organization's values. Once that is done, the question becomes one of **readiness** to give them meaning beyond a few aspirational words on a website.



The critical starting place may also be the most challenging, depending on how an organizational authority and decision-making power are distributed. It takes place not when drafting crisis communication or responding to seismic shifts in the political landscape, but when setting up and enforcing internal policies, norms, and feedback loops. As organizational development experts Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker famously wrote in *School Culture Rewired*, “The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.” Being intentional about organizational values means looking at internal practices and structures and doing the hard work of developing authentic buy-in across the organization.

For values to have the most meaning within an organization, everyone working there—from the program assistant to the CEO and board—should feel a shared responsibility for stewarding those values and ensuring that they are applied equitably.

This requires that all staff have the space to respectfully question decisions and



processes that are not aligned with the organization's values.

This may require reformulating how an organization approaches many aspects of its work, from strategic planning to budgeting to bonuses and advancement. While not a modest undertaking, the overwhelming benefit of doing so is that living an organization's values will strengthen its connection to those it serves and within its own teams.

To illustrate how this might work, consider a hypothetical health services provider for the LGBTQ+ community that centers transparency and inclusion among its values. This commitment is reflected in many ways, including proactively sharing with its clients and the larger community its policy of only seeking funding consistent with its values.

While in the process of undertaking a capital campaign for a new wing that would allow for a doubling of services to the community, a board member indicates that a leading

donor for lesbian and gay causes is interested in making a major gift. The challenge is that this donor has been publicly equivocal about the inclusion of trans individuals within the community.

Some organizations would pursue this gift without question, arguing its sufficient justification that trans people will benefit from the service expansion that these funds would help bring about. For the organization to live its stated values, however, it will be essential to create opportunities for discussion across all levels of the organization to determine whether a gift from this donor could be reconciled with the organization's values.



The cost of making this type of engagement standard operating procedure for an organization is that it will take more time to reach a decision. The benefit is that each time staff have an opportunity to weigh in, their commitment to the organization and its values are strengthened. Even if all staff may not agree on the ultimate decision, their shared sense of “ownership” of their organization's values deepens. This means that they are also far more likely to live those values when doing their work and representing their organization.

For leadership, the key will be understanding that having staff who feel empowered to question whether the organization is living its values is its greatest asset. Those who are connected to an organization's values are the ones who will be most likely to stay with the organization and work hardest to ensure its success.





How often should you check in on your values?

For an organization that is truly living its values, daily interactions will serve to constantly reinforce them. Offer ongoing opportunities to assess how fully they are succeeding, and create opportunities to make adjustments as needed. Regular, intentional reflection and recommitment are also key to ensuring that those values remain consistent with an organization's goals. There may also be unique milestones when an organization will want to revisit its values, such as in the context of a leadership transition or when addressing an external (or internal) crisis.

Processes for “checking in on values” can range from one-on-one conversations with selected staff to town hall meetings to deep dives with expert facilitators. What remains critical is that the organization's values remain alive and relevant in day-to-day work and long-term goals.

Through this process, an organization may also conclude that one or more of the values it has identified are in practice more aspirational than lived.

While organizational values are a reflection of what is most essential to your institution, living up to their standards must be realistically achievable.

If a core value appears to seem impossible to live up to, the organization should consider what it would take to make the value “livable,” or determine whether to continue centering that value.

How do you know if you are living your values?

Values often feel abstract, innate, or hard to operationalize. In moments when values are not being hotly contested, it might be hard to know if an organization is even truly living them. It takes courage to ask this question because it means accepting responsibility for

taking meaningful action based on the answers.

It is important to keep in mind that implementing values-based work can vary greatly depending on the organization and its particular values. Some, like transparency, may be easy to measure and come with agreed-upon standards approved by experts in the field, while equity can take countless forms that leave room for interpretation. For organizations that want to hold themselves accountable to their values and find more opportunities to operationalize them, we offer a few ideas in the following action steps.

Living Your Values Action Steps

- Create processes for regular, intentional check-ins with staff.
- Engage in structured reflection; name ways the organization is living each of its values and reconsider whether the values identified are the right ones.
- Assess external and internal communication to determine how well they implicitly and explicitly reflect values.
- Survey varied stakeholders to understand strengths and weaknesses.
- Invite TCC Group to facilitate conversations with staff, board, volunteers, and community partners about current strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for living and communicating values.



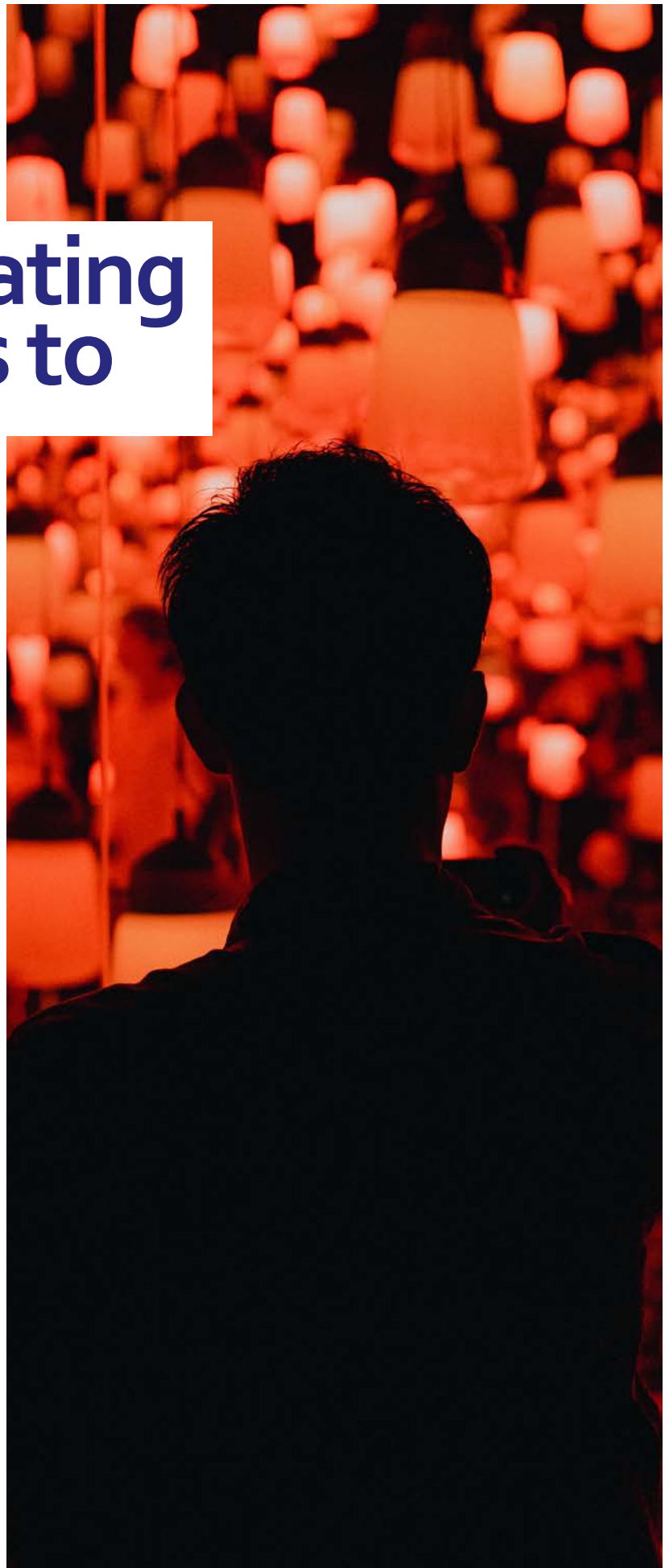
Communicating Your Values to Yourself

Often when we think about communication, the exclusive focus is external audiences.

However, in the context of communicating values, it is equally essential to be purposeful in how these are communicated within the organization itself.

Are there benefits from communicating your values to yourselves?

As we have emphasized throughout this brief, organizations that live their values inherently build and reinforce cohesion among their staff. That focus and clarity can only be sustained through regular internal communication that intentionally connects organizational priorities and practices back to those values. Living its values is a continuous process for an organization.



For new staff and board members, regular and consistent values-centered communication will aid in understanding and internalizing priorities, and provide a framework for contributing fresh insights and perspectives in ways that will be meaningful to colleagues. For long-serving staff, values-based communication can reinforce how this work has been conceptualized, as well as help to counter

the “mission drift” in strategy or approach that can occur among those who have been with an organization over many years. For all internal stakeholders, regularly communicating around values will help the organization grow and evolve in alignment with those values, creating opportunities for them to be operationalized and prioritized as new programs or policies are added.

In the case of larger organizations or institutions with geographically dispersed staff members, internally focused values-based communication can be even more essential to organizational cohesion, as it offers a unifying focus to individual staff members across departments, teams, and geographies.

How should you be communicating your values to yourselves?

In considering how organizations communicate values internally, we will begin with centering them in all formal and informal communication among organization leaders, between leadership and staff, and among staff. From new staff orientations to quarterly board meetings to weekly staff meetings and beyond, an organization's values should serve as the frame and touchstone for these conversations. This can be as simple as regularly asking “Does this choice reflect our values?” when making a decision or “Does this email explain why this choice aligns with



our values?” when developing an all-staff announcement. Organizations can also consider annual activities or discussions related to values. Depending on organizational culture, size, and resources, specific committees or activities can be dedicated to values-based communication and strengthening.

Of equal importance will be communicating values through organizational structure. For example, an organization with a core value of collaboration is not well served by a rigidly hierarchical management structure. The dissonance between the values that guide the organization’s work externally and how work is actually taking place internally will undoubtedly lead to discontent and a questioning of values commitment among staff. Similarly, an organization that espouses a value of flexibility but has restrictive policies on remote work and paid leave could readily be perceived by its staff as being hypocritical.



How can storytelling communicate your organization's “why”?

Storytelling—whether at annual retreats, weekly meetings, or around the water cooler—is an opportunity to reinforce organizational identity and values.

Stories are one of your most powerful tools for conveying values and are how you communicate your organization’s “why.”

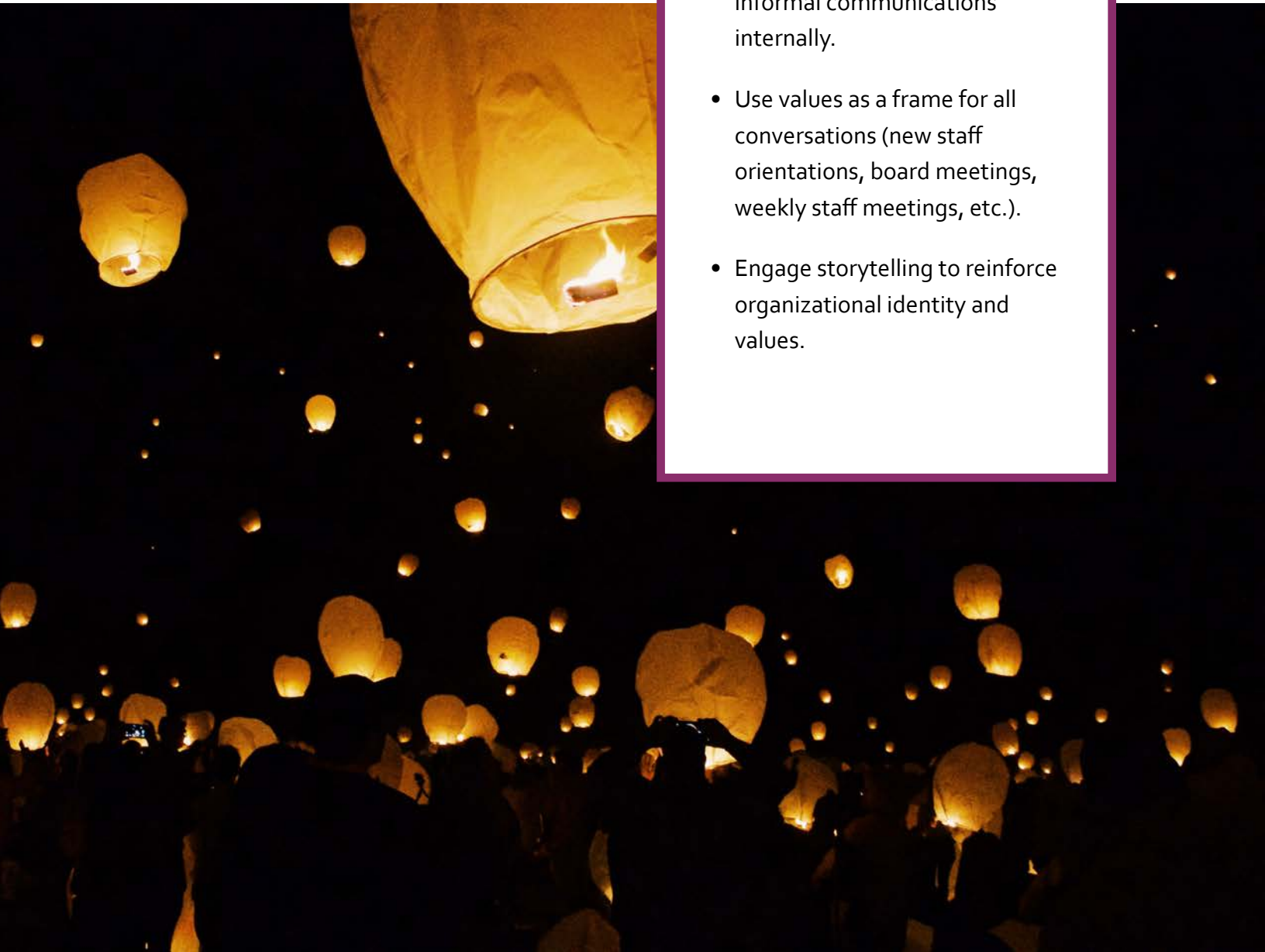
In addition to directly addressing the values that underscore organizational decisions, organizations should seek opportunities to develop and elevate impact stories, origin



stories, learning stories, challenge stories, and stories about commitment.⁴ This can be achieved through story circle exercises, case study development, blog posts, newsletters, and public remarks from a variety of stakeholders at live and virtual events.

Communicating Your Values to Yourselves Action Steps

- Center values in all formal and informal communications internally.
- Use values as a frame for all conversations (new staff orientations, board meetings, weekly staff meetings, etc.).
- Engage storytelling to reinforce organizational identity and values.



⁴ See Andy Goodman, “What Are Your Inside Stories?” https://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2002_12.pdf.



Communicating Your Values to Others

By living their values, organizations will communicate most powerfully through their actions. At the same time, leading with values in all external communication will help others clearly understand what an organization stands for, allowing them to connect more deeply with its mission and believe in its work. Moreover, building a consistent voice and story rooted in values that can be shared by all staff members will help the organizations speak with one powerful voice to many constituencies from community partners to policymakers.

How do you center your values in strategic and communications plans?

Ideally, organizations will build strategic and communication plans around their values. However, if they have existing plans and are moving toward a values-based focus, the task may involve cross-checking plans with the values that have



been committed to. In either case, seeking input from multiple stakeholders as to whether these plans live up to the organization's values should be a priority. Go value by value and ask where and whether those values are reflected. Can they be reinforced in a strategic plan, by prioritizing

new activities or incentivizing certain behaviors? When adopting new policies, can the "why" be articulated in a way that references those values?

When looking at communication plans, ask whether outputs and activities are framed around values and which moments and audiences would most benefit from deeply centering them. Even one key event, engagement, or program explicitly designed to reinforce values can go a long way toward building the relationships and culture that will ultimately strengthen organizations.

How can you bring your values and their impact to life?

Throughout an organization's marketing and communication materials, develop and implement ways to share values clearly in words, symbols, and visual images. We recommend developing several core stories about impact, history, or founding and other story "moments" that illustrate them and their unique value-add.

Stories are proven to be the most powerful tool to connect with others, be remembered, and inspire action.⁵ Once they are developed, core stories can be used across platforms, such as newsletters, videos, presentations, and live outreach.

Keep in mind that not every story has to have values listed in bold type at the top



⁵ See https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_science_of_what_makes_people_care#; and https://ssir.org/articles/entry/stop_raising_awareness_already.

(although you may want to consider this). At the very least, every external and internal communication sharing an organization's priorities, strategies, and accomplishments should be framed so that it references its values in some way. Finding ways to work the words themselves into the text and images is a good way to engage on an emotional level while demonstrating that the organization's actions are consistent with its values.



Which voices should you emphasize?

A participatory values articulation process not only builds buy-in and cohesion, but it also develops authentic ambassadors. Consider ways that volunteers, clients, partners and community members can add their voices to communication efforts. This could range from story circles to facilitated trainings. Empower them to “own” the

message and put their own point-of-view and experience into the frame.



At the same time, always be intentional about whose voices are being centered and how. Community and staff voices should be authentic and empowering. Do communications depict people with dignity rather than pity? The feelings evoked should inspire action and connection and avoid leaving audiences feeling overwhelmed by an intimidating problem. Are individual accomplishments celebrated, rather than sharing credit collectively? Unless individualism or independence is one of the values, this could undermine the intended message. Are we using celebrities in communications, reinforcing a celebration of wealth and power? Conversely, is local or indigenous knowledge that aligns with organizational values centered?

How do you learn from those you seek to reach?

Being clear about values and telling a story does not automatically guarantee that everyone will understand or make the connection. For example, while sharing a story about successful student empowerment, some audiences may find certain words or phrases self-congratulatory or paternalistic. An organization may think a certain story is fascinating and engaging while others find it confusing or uninteresting. Keep in mind, a story that works for one audience might not work for all. Seek input from the intended audience to understand how they are interpreting these

messages. Experiment and make changes as needed until the values come through clearly with each audience.

Do you all need to communicate your values in the same way?

A development director may communicate an organization's value of compassion to donors through an explicit statement supported by illustrative examples. By comparison, case managers in the same organization may never say the word "compassion" to their clients but will consistently model compassion through their interactions.

Staff should have the flexibility to express their organization's values in ways that will be meaningful, engaging, and motivating to their many different clients, partners, and audiences.

Saying "We value compassion in all we do" may resonate with one audience. "We care and we listen to you" may better communicate this value to another.



Should you tailor your values to prospective supporters?

Anyone who has engaged in fundraising knows that the key to a successful “ask” is finding the aspect of the organization's work that connects emotionally with prospective donors. Centering communication around an organization's values (and their inherent emotional resonance) offers a clear advantage in making this connection. And focusing on the value or values that may most directly engage a specific prospect is completely reasonable.

However, organizations should be cautious if efforts to engage a potential donor begin to necessitate the finessing, equivocating, or wholesale abandonment of organizational values in order to secure support. As our earlier example highlighted, an organization that compromises its values to raise funds may ultimately lose other donor support, along with the confidence of its staff and constituents.

Communicating Your Values to Others Action Steps

- Center values in strategic and communications plans.
- Emphasize values through engaging stories and images that bring them and their impact to life.
- Think critically about the values being implicitly or explicitly communicated.
- Engage a broad range of stakeholders to tell their own stories about values.
- Share values clearly, consistently, and frequently in meetings, written communications, and presentations.





Conclusion

Values-Based Communication



Conclusion

Leading With Your Values

Placing values at the center of all that organizations do and communicate will be an evolutionary process for most institutions.

Whether applying these values to grant proposals, program planning, personnel policies, how meetings are run, or how decisions get made, there will be many challenges to conventional thinking and ways of working. Similarly, putting pen to paper and publicly announcing what an organization stands for can feel like a leap into the unknown, or

an invitation to be judged. Yet, as this brief seeks to illustrate, the potential rewards of embarking on this journey will be far greater. An organization's words and actions can be positively reinforcing and attract the support and commitment that will allow it to succeed.

Organizations that are living and communicating their values continually reinforce them in everything they do and say.

They build stronger bonds with those they serve and those who support them through a deep, authentic commitment to these stated priorities. These organizations also nurture cohesion among their staff by embedding their values not just in their approach and goals but in every aspect of how they engage in their work. Perhaps most importantly, by living their values, these organizations communicate those values clearly and consistently to the world.

At TCC Group, we are continually reflecting on how we can more fully live and communicate our values. This includes an ongoing commitment to establishing and evolving internal systems that ensure our values as an organization are relevant, dynamic, and serve to narrow the space between who we are as individuals and what we can accomplish as an organization. Across the social sector, we partner with organizations seeking to define their values and explore and advance values-based communication. We are excited to learn from and share the many paths to success organizations can take toward leading with their values.

How to Get Started Leading With Values

- Center values in strategic and communication plans.
- Emphasize our values through engaging stories and images that bring them and their impact to life.
- Think critically about the values being implicitly or explicitly communicated.
- Engage a broad range of stakeholders to tell their own stories about values.
- Share values clearly, consistently, and frequently in meetings, written communication, and presentations.



About TCC Group

TCC Group collaborates with leaders to solve complex social problems. As a certified B Corporation and with more than 40 years of experience as a mission-driven firm, TCC Group partners with foundations, nonprofits, and companies to propel positive social change through strategy, capacity building, initiative design, strategic communication, management, and evaluation. We design and implement solutions for social impact by immersing ourselves in interconnected communities and systems, co-creating innovative and effective processes, and applying and sharing our experience with the field.

About the Authors

Jessie Landerman, Senior Consultant, Integrated Initiatives

Steven Lawrence, Senior Research Consultant, Grantmaking Services

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contributions made by a dedicated team of colleagues who provided their critical thinking and input that helped bring this paper to completion: Kate Emmons, Judy Ney, Helen Sacco, Claire Schultz, Susan Wolfson.

Special thanks to Allelo Design.



NEWYORK

333 7th Avenue
9th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-949-0990

PHILADELPHIA

123 S. Broad Street
Suite 1800
Philadelphia, PA 19109
215-568-0399

www.tccgrp.com
info@tccgrp.com

twitter.com/TCCGROUP
facebook.com/tccgrp
linkedin.com/company/tcc-group