

# What Matters to Me

© P.J. Parsons 2006

by

Patricia Parsons APR, Fellow CPRS

Do you know what matters to you – and more to the point of this column, have you considered what those values say about your morals and ethics? Do you recognize the extent to which they affect your behavior?

## What are “Values”?

Whenever you think about what matters to you, you are examining what ethicists define as your “values.” One way to define values is “beliefs of a person or social group in which they have an emotional investment” [NOTE 1]. This notion of emotional investment is what sets apart these beliefs and makes them values. For example, if you believe something to be true but have no emotional involvement in that truth, then it clearly isn’t very important in your view, and thus is not what you could define as one of your personal values.

One of the most important aspects of values especially when it comes to their relevance to your personal ethics is the extent to which they are or are not changeable.

Dr. Sherry Ferguson of the University of Ottawa discusses values at length in her helpful book *Communication Planning: An Integrated Approach*. Whereas the purpose of her discussion is to provide underlying theory for understanding publics in the planning process, we can learn much from her research that is useful in understanding values as they can then be applied to ethical decisions. She reports on research that suggests that “every individual holds hundreds of thousands of beliefs and thousands of attitudes but only dozens of values.” [NOTE 2] The fact that we hold many fewer values than we do attitudes is very important: it allows us to focus in on those things that are truly important and that are likely to have a huge impact on our decisions about what’s morally right or wrong.

## Why What Matters, Matters

Exactly what kinds of values are we talking about? First, consider that you hold both moral values and amoral values – not immoral values. What this implies is that on the face of them, some of the things that are important to you are typically moral considerations. These include such things as honesty and integrity, fairness, respect for others, etc. However, many, perhaps even most of our individual values are amoral – that is they have no moral component.

Amoral values include such things as valuing such psychological traits as optimism, imagination, creativity, competence, humility, as well as more concrete things such as valuing family, arts & cultural pursuits, sports, fitness, health etc.

If you were to make a list of all the things that are important to you and then take that list and put it in order of priority from the most important to the least important (is democracy more important to you than human rights, for example – I didn't say it was always an easy call), you would have a kind of road map for your moral character. That's because even those thing that you value that seem to have no moral implications in themselves do have an influence on your decisions about what's right and what's wrong. For example, when faced with an ethical dilemma, the decision made by someone whose family is important to him or her may very well be different from one who does not consider impact on family to be important. What matters to you does indeed matter when it comes to your personal ethics.

## Your Values & Your Ethics

Another important aspect in trying to understand values is the recognition that they are fairly well-established and difficult to change as adults. As Ferguson says, "...values remain relatively constant over time..." I'm always very aware of this when I teach ethics to students or to audiences at public relations conferences. Since values underlie individual considerations of morality, then teaching ethics to adults is less a matter of teaching what's right and wrong and more a matter of teaching how an individual can understand his or her values system and the impact it will have on ethical decision-making.

It should be clear to you at this point in your life that your personal values are not always congruent with those of your colleagues and if the foregoing statements on the relative permanence of values, then you are unlikely to change your colleagues very much. Indeed, at times there is a disconnect between our personal values and those exhibited by the organizations within which we toil. When either of these situations rears its head, we are facing a dysfunctional arrangement regarding ethical decision-making. This is the

reason that personal recognition of values is an important precursor to professional ethics considerations.

In the end, you need to know yourself well to be able to be comfortable that your business ethics decisions will be ones that you can live with. -30-

NOTE 1      <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=values>

NOTE 2      Ferguson, S. 1999. *Communication planning: An integrated approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 119.