

# Human Values for a Golfer and an Organizational Leader

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## Introduction

The notion of values has been studied across all social disciplines<sup>1</sup> as they form the foundation for attitudinal and behavioral responses of individuals<sup>2</sup> and some unethical business practices.<sup>3</sup> For business and organizational leaders, values generally function as the basis for making decisions and are used as a determinant for practicing a preferred leadership style in the organization.<sup>4</sup> In fact, we bring and enact our embraced human values everywhere we go. As human values are perceived to guide one's actions and serve as standards in daily living,<sup>5</sup> or act as the motivational roots of behaviors,<sup>6</sup> the individual's attitudes and behaviors may travel across different contexts. Hence, it stands to reason that one's behavior in a sporting arena—for example, golf—might insinuate the values that the individual may then embrace in the context of organizational leadership. In this paper, I discuss some of the values that golfers may exhibit on the golf course, and explore how these same values might manifest in the leader of an organization if these values do indeed travel from the golf course into the boardroom.

## Values from the Golf Course to the Boardroom

A social psychologist and cross-cultural researcher Shalom Schwartz has developed a theory of basic human values<sup>7</sup> that considers practical, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions.<sup>8</sup> This theory includes ten human values that Schwartz has discussed at length and has been validated by hundreds of samples

taken from eighty-two countries across different cultures.<sup>9</sup> I will be exploring five of these values, namely: “self-direction,” “stimulation,” “achievement,” “security,” and “benevolence.”

### **Self-Direction<sup>10</sup>**

Schwartz has defined the value of self-direction as independent thought and action, enabling the individual to be able to choose, create, and explore his or her own goals.

This value can be present in a golfer. Such a golfer might have the desire to perfect or gain mastery of every single swing. This aspiration resonates with the need for control and mastery, or “an inborn drive to do and to learn how to do”<sup>11</sup> from which the self-direction value was derived. This may explain why golfers would spend long hours at the driving range, perfecting their swings and postures, before venturing onto the golf course. Moreover, golfers who are self-directed often prefer freedom in choosing their own goals on the course. In a way, they are a group of curious, adventurous, and independent people, who would want to have the final say on how to change their tactics of play on different terrains and lies.

Likewise for self-directed leaders in organizations, they will usually have an inquisitive mindset and are adventurous enough to explore new grounds, especially in this world of uncertainties. Leaders with flexible and independent thinking will tend to have the heart and motivation for self-directed learning while they are in search of fresh ideas. They should desire to acquire new knowledge. In fact, there are many studies done on self-directed learning (SDL),<sup>12</sup> particularly in a workplace environment. SDL has been proven to be a significant contributor for work performance which has led individuals to be more competitive in the labor market.<sup>13</sup> SDL is a complex process, and this concept develops from the notion of lifelong learning that consists of formal education such as those courses offered by educational institutes, informal education that includes work-based workshops, and informal learning by reading articles and books.<sup>14</sup> In order for the organizational leaders to keep up-to-date with the latest development in their respective fields, they will embrace the attitude of SDL by taking initiative to identify their learning needs, choosing and implementing learning strategies, and evaluating their learning outcomes. It is not easy for SDL to take place effectively. While SDL could influence performance through innovation and is believed to be beneficial for the individual and at organizational levels,<sup>15</sup> it does require a certain degree of self-monitoring, self-management, independence, openness, reflection, confidence, readiness, and initiative.<sup>16</sup>

## **Stimulation**<sup>17</sup>

Schwartz has also considered stimulation as a value described as “excitement, novelty and challenge in life.”<sup>18</sup> Such “stimulation” derives from the need for variety in order to maintain an optimal level of activation and to satisfy the biological need for thrill-seeking, stimulation, and arousal, conditioned by personal social experiences.<sup>19</sup>

In golf, we can observe such a value in action. Stimulation thrives on variation. Sometimes, playing on a new course is a source of stimulation. Also, when golfers come to own a different set of golf clubs, they are stimulated and excited to try their hand on the new clubs in a golf game as soon as possible. In these cases, the golfers would be motivated to play their game better. For amateurs who are teeing off, they would definitely be stimulated and excited if they had a long drive of 350 yards—something out of the ordinary—or on a rare occasion achieved a hole-in-one. These novelties in the same game would add excitement to their future play, encouraging the golfers to persist and hone their skills further.

Similarly, for organizational leaders to lead their organizations effectively, they need to embrace the value of stimulation. Leaders must keep wanting to grow, to learn, and to develop their capacities if they are to continue as an effective leader. Further, organizational leaders must also be able to inspire and motivate their staff to undertake various challenges, especially in handling new endeavors or changing the way they work. Leaders who practice the value of stimulation will usually challenge the status quo, changing the traditional ways of performing their routines at work. Leaders will put on their critical thinking hat and create a working environment that is tolerant of novel and creative ideas. They may also nurture their staff to be open-minded and question the old ways of functioning. Such intellectually stimulating leaders will encourage their staff to be innovative for solving problems in their work and trying out new approaches.<sup>20</sup> With these practices of stimulation in place, they will likely improve organizational performance.<sup>21</sup>

## **Achievement**<sup>22</sup>

The value of achievement in Schwartz’s theory drives the person to obtain success by demonstrating competency based on social standards and was derived from the requisites of coordinated social interaction and group survival. This value is strongly related to being ambitious and having expectations of being successful and has been discussed by many academics.

In golf, we can see the fruition for the value of achievement when golfers obtain low scores through their competence in the game. Such competency is

seen in those golfers who possess the right attitude and aptitude. How well a golfer plays on the golf course depends on his approach and belief towards the sport. If the golfer believes that the improvement of his skills is possible and is also ambitious and wants to attain higher achievement through obtaining lower scores, or, if the golfer has an ambitious intention to compete with other golfers, he or she will try to improve his or her competency through regular practices at the driving range or on the golf course.

In highlighting how expectancies for success could translate into one's achievement, an expectancy-value model of achievement motivation<sup>23</sup> was developed. In this model, expectancies and values are believed to impact directly on the individual's achievement. Organizational leaders' expectancies and values can be influenced by task-specific beliefs, such as their ability beliefs, which are closely related to their competencies in the tasks, the perceived difficulty level of tasks, and the leaders' goals and memories. These social, cognitive factors are subject to the leaders' perceptions of their previous experiences and social influences. Hence, expectancy for success is the belief in how well they will do for the given task in the future, while ability beliefs are seen as the perception of an individual's current competence in the given activity.<sup>24</sup> Although ability beliefs and expectancies for success are distinguished conceptually, they are both highly correlated. For instance, when the organizational leader believes that he or she has the ability to perform certain tasks, the success rate for that undertaking will be higher. Similarly, if the leader considers his competency level for the task is low, the likelihood for the leader to succeed in the assignment will be reduced greatly.

## **Security**<sup>25</sup>

The essence of security value is the need for harmony, safety, and stability in society and in relationships. This value of security can serve individual interests, as well as the interests of a wider community or group. Among many other things, a person can experience security when there is harmony in his or her relationships with others.

Do we see such harmonious security among the golfers? Golfers who embrace this value will keep to the rules of the game and help one another on the course, so as to maintain harmonious relationships and physical safety among players. Is there loud shouting or quarrels on the course, or is there laughter during the golf game? In a common battle against the terrain and the obstacles, bonds among golfers are usually formed, barriers are broken, and mutual understanding is reached. Apart from the tranquility of the greenery, the pace of the game, which

allows conversations, can enable the fostering of deep relationships among golfers, creating a sense of belonging and stability of bond. Some golfers actively welcome that. Golfers who embrace harmonious security may encourage one another with words like “nice shot!” instead of a snigger, or even go about helping fellow golfers search for lost balls, rather than simply turning their heads and walking away.

In many parts of the world such as China and other Asian countries, harmonious security in relationships, especially in businesses, is considered as a high priority and has been examined as a value, motive, or goal.<sup>26</sup> Organizational leaders would be able to fuel strong and more intimate business partnerships by espousing the value of harmony, to increase the effectiveness of the organization.<sup>27</sup> This value of harmonious security in relationships is particularly necessary in business exchanges, as it has been widely acknowledged. In this sense, organizational leaders will need to put in considerable efforts to uphold the relationship quality by maintaining harmony in the organization and with business partners. In business and organizational management, this value of security is considered a key indicator of long-term success. With these high-quality relationships in the organization, effectiveness of relationship-building will be greatly enhanced,<sup>28</sup> favorable financial outcomes will be generated,<sup>29</sup> mutual benefits beyond the sheer exchange of goods and services will be achieved,<sup>30</sup> and the business performances will be improved.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, for such harmonious security relationships to take place, two factors are necessary—communication and long-term orientation. First, communication among stakeholders is fundamental for fostering confidence among people. This is needful especially for building sustainable relationships and to reduce dysfunctional conflict.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, how a leader communicates his or her thoughts to the staff, or even to business partners, will determine the stability of their relationships. Second, long-term orientation in building relationships is fundamental. Organizational leaders with the heart for maintaining harmonious relationships will usually have a long-term orientation toward their relationships with others. This is particularly true when leaders expect continuity in relationships with their business partners.<sup>33</sup>

## **Benevolence<sup>34</sup>**

The value of benevolence focuses on the welfare of others in every interaction and is based on the need for positive interaction and affiliation. The key motivations behind this value are the preservation and enhancement of people’s welfare, especially those in frequent personal contact.<sup>35</sup>

This benevolence value can also be seen in the context of golf. This game could be seen as either an individual sport or as a team sport that one plays with others. There are always emotional ups and downs, for example, when the golfers have good tee shots, hit their golf balls over the water hazard, or when their golf balls are stuck in the sand bunkers. During those moments, continuous support and encouragement from fellow golfers may manifest. Such supportive attitudes in turn manifest benevolence.

How do we see such value practiced in business organizations? While benevolence is an indigenous Chinese leadership practice that has its origin in the three-dimension model (the two other behaviors are authoritarianism and morality) of paternalistic leadership,<sup>36</sup> the practice of benevolence has also been studied in Western contexts such as Turkey<sup>37</sup> and Canada.<sup>38</sup> In an organization, benevolent acts can be illustrated when one demonstrates individualized genuine care and considers the interest of others and the well-being of their families. A leader who is benevolent would also spend great effort in taking care, expressing concern, and encouraging others to solve problems.<sup>39</sup> In this way, benevolent leaders will usually earn respect and trust from their staff, which will bring positive influence on the staff's work performance.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion: Golf and the Interview**

In this essay, I have examined five human values based on Schwartz's theory of basic human values<sup>41</sup> and have illustrated how a golfer and a leader will exhibit their embraced values on the golf course and in an organization, respectively. The values that have been discussed are: (1) self-direction, (2) stimulation, (3) achievement, (4) security, and (5) benevolence.

Thus far, this essay has been a theoretical exploration of the five above-mentioned values that assumes the transferability of these values from the golf course to the organization. Of course, an empirical study of whether and to what extent values travel from the golf course to the boardroom could corroborate our theoretical claims with empirical evidence. Still, given the reflections above, there may be reason for a company to bring its next potential executive for an eighteen-hole "interview" on a golf course before it decides to hire him or her. Seeing how the candidate manifests his or her values on and around the greens could enable the firm to make an educated conjecture about what kind of organizational leader he or she will be.

## Notes

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