

News and information about the nonprofit sector in Massachusetts. *Check back frequently to keep informed.*

Defining Organizational Values

By Jay W. Vogt



Jay Vogt

Organizational values are ideals and customs that govern the way you do what you do. They need not be written down—indeed they are worthless unless lived—but articulating them helps remind everyone what they are, and helps communicate them to new employees.

You know them best by observing the people who live them. Think of several people in your organization who work most in keeping with how you think things should be done around your organization. What are the values that they embody? Think of times when some line was crossed and you felt a deep sense of violation of the spirit of where you work. What was the value that got violated? These are great ways to sense your organization's underlying values.

The **Massachusetts Audubon Society** is more than a century old, but it had never written down its organizational values. As an organization committed to participation and with over two hundred employees, it was eager to engage its people in this process. And as a tightly managed nonprofit, it needed to do so efficiently, effectively, and inexpensively.

The president, Laura Johnson, assembled a Values Team to oversee the effort, and they engaged me to help them design and implement a process that they could run themselves. It needed to involve as many staff as possible in the organization, and it had to be easy and fun.

The simplest way to reach everyone was to get onto the agendas of existing meetings throughout the organization that would, collectively, touch the most staff. The cheapest way to do this was for me to train Values Team members to lead the values conversations themselves. The easiest and fastest way to reach the value essence in these conversations was through sharing appreciative stories, and then finding common themes, before distilling the core values.

The values discussions lasted just one hour, using one process flow for small groups, and another one for large groups. Here is the flow for large groups:

- Start by introducing the meaning and importance of values (5 minutes)
- Explain the first task - sharing stories of high points in one's experience of Mass Audubon (5 minutes)
- Have participants share those stories in groups of eight (15 minutes)
- Explain the second task - finding common themes (5 minutes)
- Have participants find common themes - working in groups of eight (15 minutes)
- Have reporters from each group share their results (10 minutes)
- Ask every participant to write out on cards those value words or phrases that best capture the essence of Mass Audubon (5 minutes)

After achieving remarkable participation in just a few months, the Values Team then got together for several meetings to distill their learning into six core values. A survey test of the acceptance of these values among employees subsequently revealed broad and deep regard for them. They somehow touched the core. Curious about the results? Look them over at [clicking here](#).

Johnson reflected, "This process was deeply engaging to staff across the organization. It gave people the space to reflect on what was important, both to them and to Mass Audubon. It was incredibly inspiring to hear what people had to say. When you think that it was not a big time investment, it's especially amazing—that an hour, carefully planned in advance, could be so transformative."

For another example, download the program model for **Gaining Ground**, the farm that grows and gives away organic produce for hunger relief, and look at pages 6 and 7 of their [statement of values](#).

Organizational values reflect the organization as it is, at its best. Writing them down reminds veterans, and orients newcomers, as to how things are done. Living them, and sharing stories of times when others lived by them, keeps them alive and well.

Jay W. Vogt is president of Peoplesworth and author of Recharge Your Team: The Grounded Visioning Approach by Praeger. Contact Jay at jay@peoplesworth.com.