

Teaching note: Values exercise

A person's values form the foundation for their attitudes, decisions and personal preferences. However, often people take their values for granted and are largely unaware of them. This exercise prompts students to identify the values that are the most important to them and then to articulate why those values are important to them.

In class, students are given the list of 18 values with two blank lines for them to fill in with additional values if the values that they think are most important are not on the list. Students are first asked to circle the eight to 10 values that are most important to them, or if they are not listed, to write them in the blanks.¹ Once the students have chosen their initial set of values, the instructor asks the students to pare their list down in ever-decreasing numbers, giving time for students to shorten their list each time. The goal is to get students to one or two values left on the list.

The instructor then asks the students how they made their choices in narrowing their lists. Answers will vary, but in general, students articulate a process by which they begin to group broader values under one value term (for example, "family" or "friends" ends up under the umbrella term of "love").

Next, each person in the room should be asked to share their one or two primary values with the whole group — this should include the instructor as well. This part of the exercise can be framed to the students as being about transparency. We often use these values in our everyday lives without being transparent to ourselves or others that these are the values that are guiding us. By saying our values out loud, we are wearing those values on the outside, so to speak.

Finally, the instructor can ask students to reflect on what they can do to live out their values more explicitly. If there is time, students can be divided into small groups to brainstorm how they can live out their values before returning to the large group discussion.

The instructor could conclude the session with some thoughts about servant leadership, which is based on values related to serving others rather than advancing one's personal power.

¹ The number of initial values chosen should be enough that students will need to pare down the list of values as the exercise continues. We recommend 8-10 initial values depending on the time allocated for the exercise.