Core Values

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Introduction

Core Values are a fundamental set of beliefs about how we individually and collectively behave as we go about doing our work. These serve as guiding principles, are core elements of an organization's culture, are relevant for all its Ideal Stakeholders, and can endure challenging times.

As you build your organization's **Vision**, you'll want to surround yourself with people who embody your Core Values — people you **trust** not just in terms of character and competency but in terms of connection. Use Core Values as an essential **Focus Filter** to align individuals and teams around the behaviors critical for your organization's success.

Establishing, sharing, and living your Core Values are essential to building a great company. But to benefit your organization, your Core Values need to be more than empty words — they should be embodied by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), team leaders, and frontline team members.

Context

In their book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras found that consistently successful, enduring organizations ensure their people embody an explicit set of Core Values. These "Ideal Team Members" are often called the **"Right People" you want in the "Right Seats."**

Beyond forming connections, Core Values also help simplify choices when interviewing potential candidates, performing general work, and providing feedback and coaching.

There's no universally correct set of Core Values or a perfect formula for building and sustaining a great **culture**. Organizations must define their Core Values for themselves. As Collins and Porras put it, your Core Values "require no external justification; they have intrinsic value and importance to those inside the organization." These should be guiding principles to live and work by, not material for a marketing campaign.

Crafting Your Core Values

There are many ways to develop a robust and enduring set of Core Values. Our favorite method involves your SLT getting together and following this process:

1. Have everyone write down the names of three team members you love working with.

2. A facilitator guides the team through sharing their lists. After each name is read, have the team share words and phrases that best describe that person — their attitudes, practices, and behaviors.

3. Repeat steps 1 and 2, but this time, focus on past or present team members who were or are challenging to work with.

4. Have the team scan the lists of team members and descriptions. They should eliminate any words or phrases that aren't behaviors, such as "integrity" or "organized."

5. Remove synonymous words and phrases to shrink your list.

6. Identify pairs of positive items with their opposite (antithetical), negative attributes.

7. Document around three to seven ideal characteristics you want at least 90% of your team members to possess and some additional descriptors.

8. Next, test your list of Core Values on yourselves. You need to establish a Core Values Rating System and bar to do this. The Entrepreneurial Operating System® uses a "+," +/-," and "-" rating system to denote strong fit, mediocre fit, and poor fit, respectively. Most **BOS coaches** teach their clients that a "-" is unacceptable. If your SLT doesn't exemplify these

Core Values, it's unlikely they'll resonate and work. In fact, they will likely hurt your SLT's credibility. If so, you'd be wise to return to the drawing board or schedule some **hard conversations**.

9. Finally, consider the following questions about your Core Values to solidify your list.

- Do they articulate the essential behaviors you value in your colleagues?

- Will they help create a culture where your type of people will thrive?

- Are you using words that you say all the time and are relatively unique to your culture?

- Will they endure as you grow and evolve?

- Do they apply to every person you hire?

Applying Core Values

How do you use your Core Values to decide if someone is a good cultural fit? At Ninety, **we have six Core Values**:

- **GSSD** — Get Smart Stuff Done.

- **Team** — Collaborate, trust, support, create, and deeply care about living up to our agreements.

- **Resilient** — Calmly and wisely respond to adversity and setbacks.

- **Inquisitive** — Seek mastery, ask questions (don't assume), and continue to learn.

- **Best** — Continually strive to improve and become the best version of yourself for your personal growth, your colleagues, and the company overall.

- **Extra Mile** — Proactively go the extra mile when needed.

We use our Core Values as a bar for potential candidates to clear and for current team members to stay above.

When a candidate or team member doesn't exemplify at least four of our six, or worse, has opposite characteristics of one or more of our Core Values, they are deemed "below the bar" for our organization. If this is one of our existing team members, we will go out of our way to help them get above the bar or help them go so they can find an organization that's a better fit for them.

When you first establish your Core Values, we recommend evaluating everyone in the organization by these values. This analysis helps you determine cultural fit and keeps the Right People in the Right Seats.

Incorporate Core Values into your quarterly people reviews. Ninety's **1-on-1 tool** allows both the team leader and the team member to rate the team member's embodiment of the organization's Core Values. During the quarterly discussion, both parties should discuss their respective ratings and, if necessary, discuss any disagreements. As a leader, bring up examples of when you've seen the Core Values displayed and where there may be some challenges, offering encouragement when and where appropriate.

Core Disciplines of Core Values

1. Focus Filters, like Core Values, increase your focus and alignment on what matters. Focus Filters help decision-makers know when to give an emphatic Yes or No to an idea, question, or decision. With Core Values in place as one of your filters, the process of screening candidates, existing team members, and potential clients becomes straightforward. Engaging customers with antithetical values drains your organization's morale and endangers the trust you've built with your team. Instead, use your values to discover and retain your **Ideal Stakeholders**.

2. Core Values are linked to trust. When you first share your Core Values with your organization or with a class of onboarding team members, it will be apparent to them immediately if the company practices what it preaches. With your Core Values guiding your culture, team members will feel connected to each other and their work. Build on this trust through transparency and being an exemplar of your values.

3. Your values should be evident in your key processes. For example, if you value professional development and ongoing learning from your team members, you'll need to encourage those behaviors. You may encourage team members to start book clubs on

company time, make funds available for courses or certifications, and recognize individuals who put in the time to improve themselves.

Hopefully Helpful Hints

Opposite traits of your Core Values should be used as red flags in the hiring process. As we said before, a benefit of Core Values as guiding principles is that they allow you to automate several decisions. These values help you understand what's important and unimportant to your organization. And while antithetical behaviors to your Core Values may not be inherently negative, they're still worth noting during hiring and review. For example, a tech startup has "Bold" and "Maximizing Efficiency" as two of its core values. Candidates who are more cautious and extraordinarily thorough would not do poorly in their position because of these traits. Instead, they wouldn't fit with the culture established by the company.

When creating your Core Values, remember the people and experiences that inspired them. Having memorable stories related to each of your Core Values maintains the human element of your organization. People learn from and are inspired by stories. If the all-nighters pulled by your engineering team to keep your website functional during an uptick of new clients inspired your Core Value of perseverance, tell that story to new team members and at large company gatherings to keep the value's spirit alive.

Core Values promote a healthy culture for in-person and remote organizations. As companies recruit across more time zones and offer remote opportunities, the increased talent pool makes hiring, reviewing, rewarding, firing, and recognizing according to your Core Values even more critical. Living by these values shows that your culture appreciates trust and transparency.

Takeaway

Organizations built to last have explicit, coherent, and resonant Core Values that attract and retain Ideal Team Members. Be mindful not to include competency-related traits as part of your Core Values, as they invariably won't apply to everyone. As a Focus Filter, Core Values help us make decisions with the organization's Vision in mind. They guide us toward

specific actions and people while helping us reject others who won't help us achieve our Vision or fit our culture. Living and working by our Core Values bonds teams together and keeps everyone rowing in the same direction.

What's next? Visit the **90u Library** or **try Ninety today**.

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