

Values transparency and inter-professional communication

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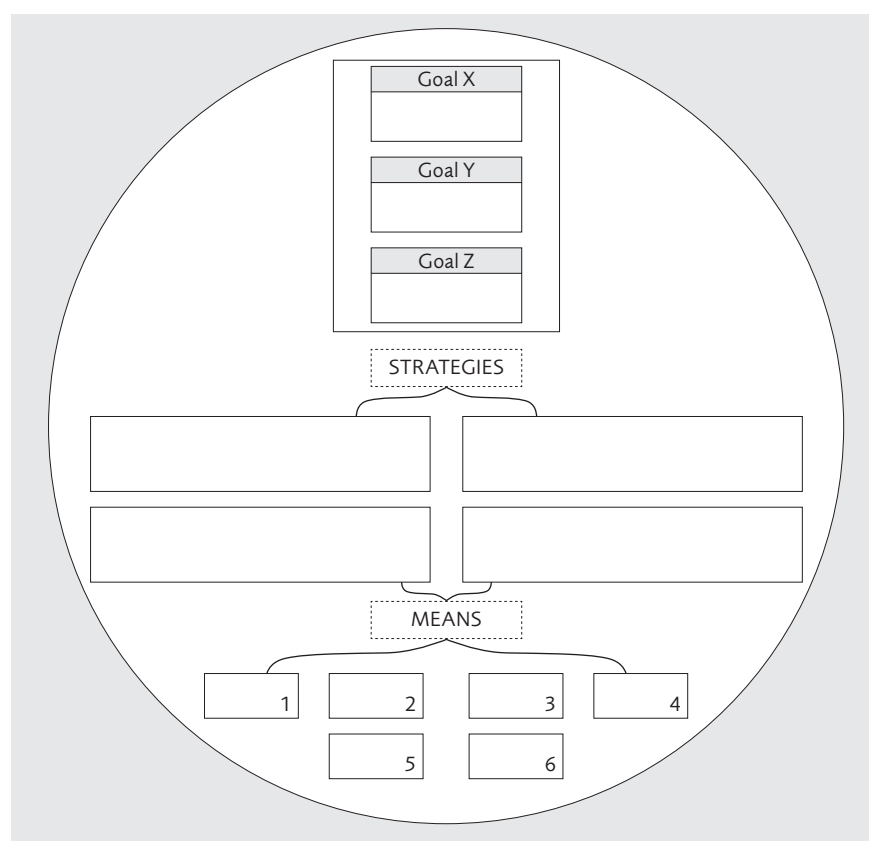
As soon as a person starts to think of herself as a particular type of health professional she begins to move apart from those in other health professions—a phenomenon considered so damaging that universities offer whole courses in inter-professional learning to try to understand and counteract it.

But why concentrate on professional communication difficulties? All of us misunderstand each other most of the time because we greatly overestimate the role of evidence and logic and greatly underestimate the influence of our wilder humanness in our decision-making.

The world we imagine we live in (certainly in the health professions) is a comfortingly logical, navigable place—with signposts everywhere (Figure 1).

Understood like this, life presents us with problems and goals, we work as best as we can to fit strategies and means together to tackle the problems and achieve the goals. For example; our company will diversify (Goal X) in order to minimise risk (Goal Y) in order to expand public awareness of our brand (Goal Z). Our medical school will offer graduate entry (Goal X) in order to recruit more students (Goal Y) in order to

Figure 1. The 'we've got it under control' view of the world



qualify for more research funding (Goal Z). This patient has disease M and co-morbidities N and Q; we have means A and B therefore our strategy should be P.

But life isn't really like this. 'We've got it under control' rationality cannot exist without four massive aspects of life, which we disastrously undervalue with

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The **ETHICS** column explores issues around practising ethically in primary health care and aims to encourage thoughtfulness about ethical dilemmas that we may face.

THIS ISSUE: Professor David Seedhouse, a well-known writer on health, ethics and decision-making, discusses his web-based Values Exchange, a unique way to debate social issues.

phrases like ‘external factors’ or ‘social influences’. Yet without these four factors there can be no goals or plans at all.

These life elements are: *Classifications*; *Instincts*; *Environment*; *Values*.

These life elements are populated with different content, dependent on any given situation. For example, for our company part of the *environment* is capitalism; some of the *instincts* are to grow, to defeat competition, to survive; some of the *values* are profit and security; key *classifications* are leverage, market share and thousands of other terms used to validate business practice. For an individual child who sets out to work hard some of the *environment* is home and school; the *instincts* are in part to please parents, to succeed, to look good to peers; the *values* are (possibly) to flourish, to have self-esteem; and the *classifications* may be grades, university education, career, job security and so on.

Of course what I am saying is simplified almost to the point of caricature—in reality every part of this figure is deep and complex, and every part overlaps. But there are insights here nonetheless:

1. To understand anything about the ‘we’ve got it under control’ view of the world, you have to know what is outside its logical structures (for it is only *outside* these structures that goals and strategies are formed).
2. Rationality is both inside and outside—rationality is logic and strategy and emotion, preference and instinct.

I have created a system called the Values Exchange (www.values-exchange.com) which is designed to make people’s values transparent. The system sets up proposals with which respondents have to agree or disagree, using a series of interactive screens which help them clarify their values, as they reflect.

Figure 2. Life elements

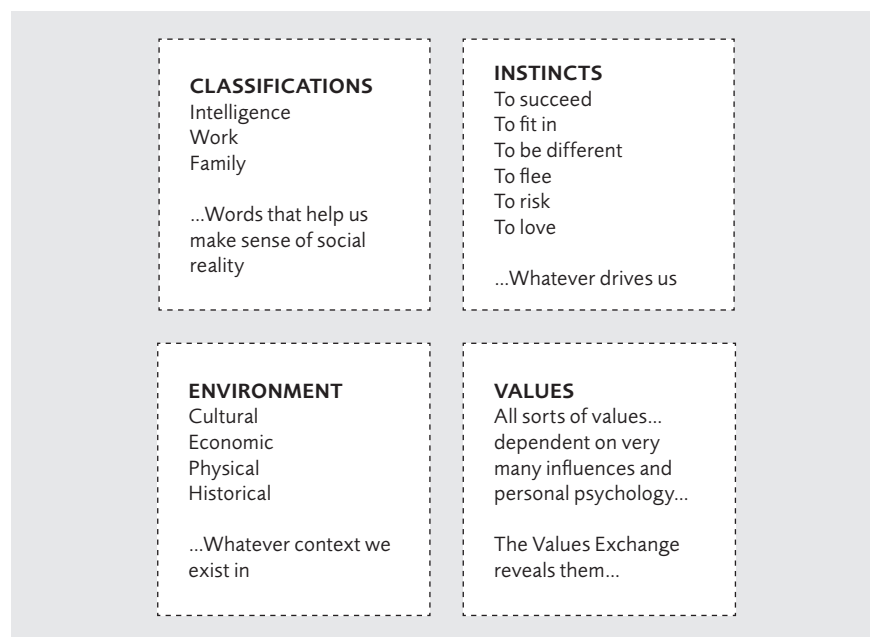
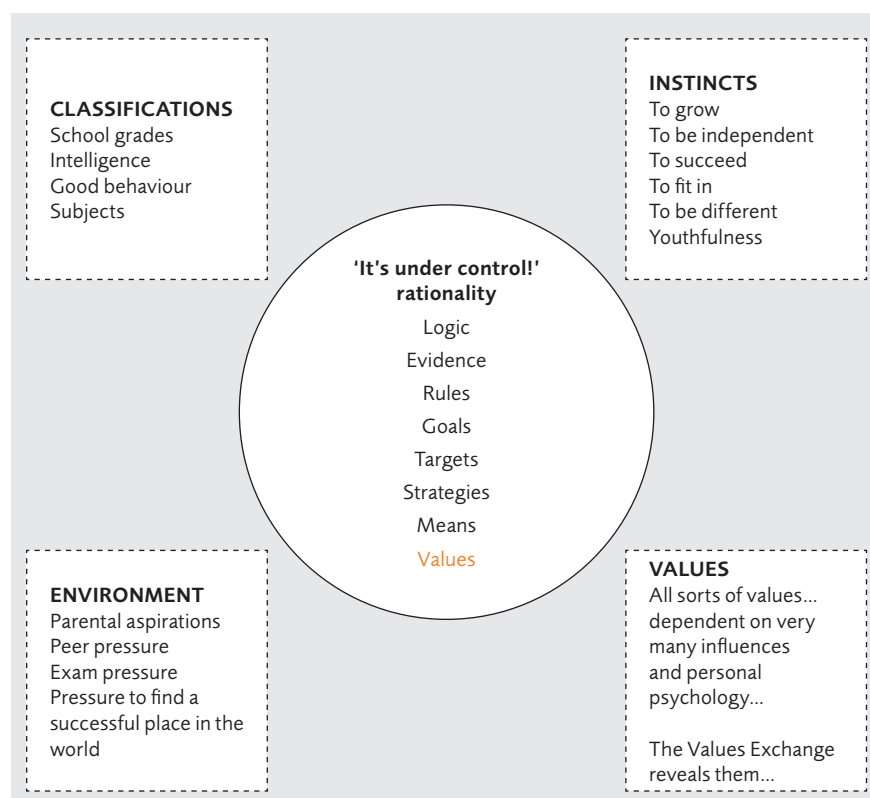


Figure 3. A more realistic view of the world of a child who sets out to work hard in school (values shown in the wrong place, as they are often perceived)



There are now nearly 30 Values Exchanges in existence in schools, universities, professional organisations and health authorities (see www.values-exchange.com). These consistently show that:

1. Using the Values Exchange is a powerful emotional experience—a survey of first-time university participants found that over 85% were emotionally affected by using the Values Exchange.
2. About 5% of participants completely change their minds halfway through the reflective process.
3. People can revisit the same proposal after a couple of weeks and present a totally different argument and set of values.
4. People from the *same* social environment and profession can (a) make totally contrasting choices about proposals, and (b) can exhibit totally different values profiles accumulated over multiple cases.

In a telling example, students at Auckland University School of Pharmacy recently undertook a project using the Values Exchange to compare the opinions of 50 first- and fourth-year students about three dilemmas in pharmacy practice, concerning whether or not to dispense to potentially 'at risk' patients.

The Values Exchange is able to compare respondents' values trends over multiple cases. In the Auckland study—even after only three cases—every student's values trend was different—in many instances dramatically so (see Figure 4).

Anonymous user 3864, for example, is very focussed on the importance of risk and law, while 3859 plainly values her role and dignity most.

Conclusion

We assume there is something special about inter-professional communication

difficulties, but really there is no difference between people from different professions and different people *per se*. Were academics to spend an equivalent amount of time researching *intra*-professional communication difficulties as they spend on *inter*-professional communication I guarantee they would find identical issues.

Whenever we have a social question to solve, we bring a whole package of history, education, indoctrination, biology, innate values, learnt values, half-formed values, and much else besides. And because we each have a unique combination of this background colour we reach our decisions in different ways—yes, we may each agree with a proposal but we will do so for a whole range of different reasons. And here's the rub; when we see that other people agree with our decision we tend to assume that we therefore share the same rationale—yet the evidence of the Values Exchange (across every measure) is overwhelmingly that agreement is no guarantee whatsoever that our background packages gel. And this is why, from time to time, we are surprised by the strangeness of people whom we thought we knew well, even intimately well—how could she say that? How could she do that? I thought we had the same values. I thought she saw things the same as me.

But no-one does. No-one sees things exactly the same as anyone else. That is an impossibility.

The answer to the problem of inter-professional miscommunication—if it is a problem at all—is transparency; the answer is for us to reveal our different reasoning processes as fully as possible over as many social issues as possible. That way not only will we realise that a confusing sea of different perceptions is part of human life, but we stand a chance of learning deeply from each other too, as we begin to appreciate how things look in others' shoes.

Figure 4. Values trends of different individuals over three cases

