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Resolving Conflict by Understanding Personal Values

The presidents of two companies have opposite personal values. One of them is high in the Utilitarian value (passion for money and what is useful) and low in the Social value. The other CEO is high in the Social value (passion for service to others) and low in the Utilitarian value.

These two men were participants at different times in executive leadership coaching sessions, during which the first president said what he was most proud of doing for his company is that he never let employees borrow money from the company. He was focused on the bottom line, which is characteristic of his high Utilitarian value.

The other president volunteered that what he was most proud of accomplishing for his company is that he set up a credit union so his employees could borrow money from the company. He was focused more on helping others, which is a trait of his high Social (humanitarian) value. It's a good thing these two men aren't business partners. Can you imagine the two of them trying to agree on what's best for the company when making important decisions?

This true story is indicative of what's happening in board rooms and conference rooms of corporations and small businesses around the world. The people charged with making decisions and implementing action can't agree on what's most important because of their values differences. Some of them are giving in and perhaps building up unspoken resentments which contribute to stress in the workplace.

Here's an exercise you can try with your team to see how different values color our perceptions. Get some \$1-million dollar bills at a novelty store. Give one to each person on your team and set this scenario.

You're a benefactor who's giving each person one-million dollars to spend on your company. Emphasize this money is for the company, not them personally. The rules are that they must spend all of the money on the company. They cannot invest it to get more money. And it must be spent on only one thing.

Ask each person to write down and tell you what they would spend the money for to benefit the company. Their answers will probably differ widely. And what they choose may be a clue to help you determine their highest value.

There are six values, or attitudes, first categorized by psychologist Eduard Spranger in 1928 then later developed into a personal values assessment used by many businesses today for hiring, developing, and retaining the best employees. In addition to the Utilitarian and Social, they are: Theoretical (passion for knowledge), Aesthetic (passion for beauty, balance, and harmony) Individualistic (passion for power and control), and Traditional (passion for order and a system for living).

So, how might someone with a particular passion choose to spend the one-million dollars? Here are some possibilities:

- **High Theoretical.** Spend it on research and development.
- **High Utilitarian.** Will complain that they can't invest it, but would likely spend it on sales and marketing improvements, or whatever will contribute most to the bottom line.
- **High Aesthetic.** Spend it on making improvements to the building(s) and landscaping.
- **High Social.** Set up a program to help employees or donate it to the company's favorite charity.
- **High Individualistic.** Spend it on advertising that shows the world you are the most powerful company on earth.
- **High Traditional.** Buy equipment, programs, and training to improve productivity and safety.

Why is it important to understand the values of your management team and employees? Our values are our passions and determine our work attitudes. An understanding of differing personal values can help you hire the right person for the job, manage employees more effectively, build high performance teams, and move toward the leadership of the future.

If your team has trouble dealing with conflict or has a conflict of vision, I suggest you assess their values and see if that could be the cause. Then you'll be better equipped to begin improving employee relations and thereby improve profitability.

Employee assessments and diversity training are a powerful combination in improving your communication skill and conflict resolution skill. The Estes Group's human resource management training will help you in building a corporate team whose members will gain more respect and regard for each other. Annette Estes is a Certified Professional Behavioral and Values Analyst, human resource consultant, trainer, coach, and author of the [award-winning book](#) "Why Can't You See It My Way? Resolving Values Conflicts at Work and Home." Get a free leadership assessment at <http://www.coachannette.com>