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Coaching Tool: Creating a Value Tree

Thinking Creatively about Goals and Values

When is this technique useful?

Whenever you have a big decision to make, the best place to start thinking about it is by *identifying what really matters*, that is, by clarifying goals and values. Creating a value tree is a great tool to help you think creatively about those and organize them logically.

Even if you don't have a decision coming up right now that you are already aware of, it can be a very good investment to take some time once in a while to think about your core goals and values, and then use those to search actively for decision opportunities [Keeney, 1996b, Keeney, 1996a].

Who should use this?

Regular folks

The technique can be used very well by anybody on their own. It can also be used by couples or groups who want to explore and clarify their goals. Often, just getting clarity about the issues that matter most to everybody can bring new insights and ideas for creative solutions.

Organizations

Creating a value tree is a powerful tool for work teams. For example, it can be extremely useful as a first step in a strategic planning session for businesses or non-profit organizations.

Counselors, Coaches, Facilitators

While the technique is easy to use by individuals with the description below, it can be taken to a much deeper level by working through it in a counseling or coaching setting. It also particularly well-suited for couples counseling or group settings (see suggestions on page 5 on how to use the technique with couples or groups).

The Technique

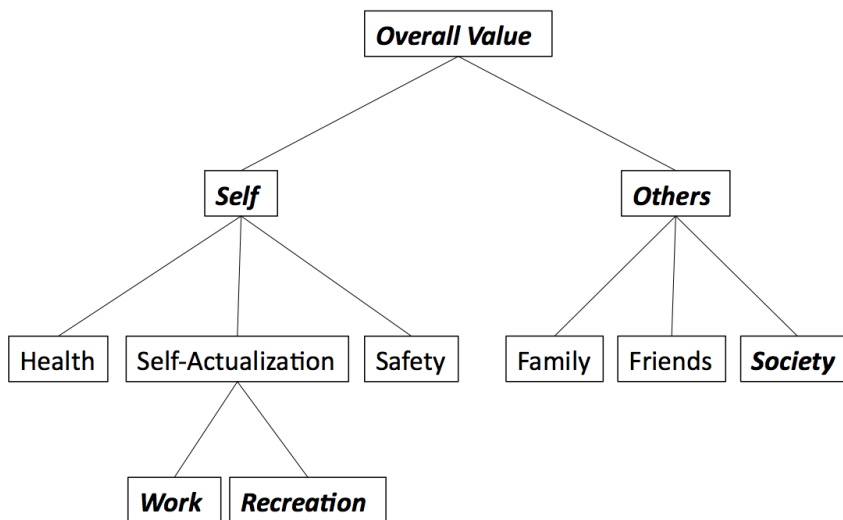
Several aspects make a value tree a powerful technique for exploring goals and values. The tree introduces a visual mode to issues that may have been thought about only in a verbal mode, and it unites separate aspects, thoughts and perspectives to a single visual representation. This can bring great clarity, stimulate creative thoughts, and foster constructive communication. To create a value tree, we take the following steps [Anderson, 2002]:

1. **Initial pool.** Start with a free brainstorming of all your "values", by which we mean all the issues that matter for your decision: your goals or criteria; what you want or don't want; what would make you happy or scares you, etc—anything that is relevant for your decision. Write each value on a small piece of paper (sticky-notes are particularly useful for that).
 - (a) It is a good idea to start this value generating process with a few very open-ended questions:

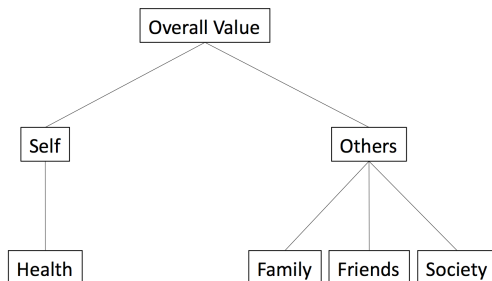
- What are issues of importance in my decision?
 - What are the things that matter?
 - What am I looking for?
 - What do I want?
 - What are my passions, intentions, joys, dreams?
 - What makes me happy?
 - What am I afraid of?
- (a) Once you run out of ideas after this very open phase, consider the following topics to help you to come up comprehensive set of values, interests, and concerns that are relevant for your decision:
- Stakeholders
 - Consider who is affected by the decision and what their values might be. Stakeholders may be family, friends, neighbors, society, future generations, or other species, but they can be anyone who could be substantially impacted by your decision, whether intentionally or unintentionally.
 - Basic human needs. Consider whether any of the following needs might be relevant to your current decision [Maslow, 1970]:
 - Physiological values—e.g., health & nutrition
 - Safety values—feeling secure
 - Social values—being loved and respected
 - Self-actualization values—doing and becoming what one “is fitted for”
 - Cognitive values—craving to satisfy curiosity, to know, to explain, and to understand
 - Aesthetic values—experiencing beauty
 - Intangible consequences. We are most inclined to overlook intangible consequences, such as:
 - How will you feel about yourself for having made this choice?
 - How will others think of you for having made this choice?
A lacking awareness of such intangible consequences can easily lead to decisions that we regret. Also, if there is a disagreement between our gut feelings about a decision and a thorough analysis, it is very often an unawareness of intangible consequences that lies at the bottom.
 - Pros and cons of options you already see
 - For each option that you can think of, ask yourself what its best and worst aspects would be. These will be values.
 - Give special consideration to costs and risks. We tend to start our planning by thinking about the positive goals we hope to achieve. It takes extra effort to think about the costs and risks, but thinking about them is the first step toward avoiding them.
 - Future values
 - Consider future impacts, as well as those in the present. People have a strong tendency to neglect or underweight future consequences.
 - Imagine yourself in the future, perhaps on your death bed, looking back on this decision. What would be important to you?
2. **Clustering.** Once you run out of ideas, start clustering your ideas—move the pieces of paper around until you have grouped similar ideas together.
3. **Labeling.** Next, label each group with the higher-level value that holds it together.
- As a simplified example, let's assume some initial values we came up with are SELF-ACTUALIZATION, FAMILY, SAFETY, FRIENDS, and HEALTH.

- HEALTH, SAFETY, and SELF-ACTUALIZATION could be grouped together and labeled “SELF”, and FAMILY and FRIENDS could be grouped together and labeled “OTHERS”.
4. **Moving up the tree.** Next, see whether you can group these groups into still larger groups.
 - SELF and OTHERS group into OVERALL VALUE.
 5. **Moving down the tree.** We also see if we can divide them into still smaller sub-groups.
 - SELF-ACTUALIZATION could be divided into WORK and RECREATION.
 6. Another way to add new ideas to a tree is to ask yourself, for each level in the tree, whether you can think of any additional items at that level (**moving across the tree**). In addition to FAMILY and FRIENDS, we could add SOCIETY.

The figure below displays the final result of the (still simplified) example. The boldfaced, italicized terms represent basic values that weren't among the ones we initially wrote down but were brought to mind as we sought to fill out the tree.



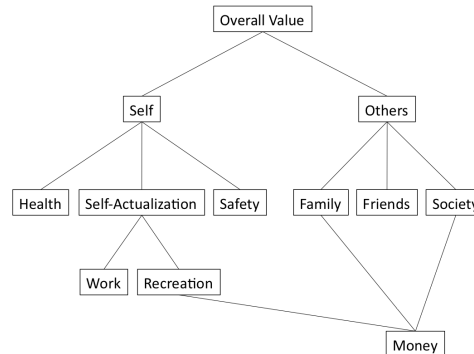
Note. Two mistakes commonly made in creating value trees show up as clearly identifiable visual patterns. It's important to be able to spot them. One is illustrated in the following diagram:



Notice that the path on the left is unbranched. Any node that doesn't branch into multiple paths but has only one path coming out of it isn't necessarily wrong but should be a warning sign. Nodes represent categories, and categories typically have multiple members. One of the reasons for creating a value tree is

to help you think of additional members of categories. An unbranched path indicates a failure in this respect. An unbranched path suggests rather strongly that you have more thinking to do.

Another common mistake in creating value trees is illustrated by the pattern shown here:

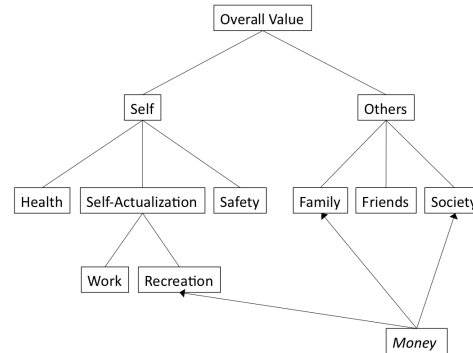


Notice that the paths converge—on MONEY, in this case. In a classification tree, branches can only di-

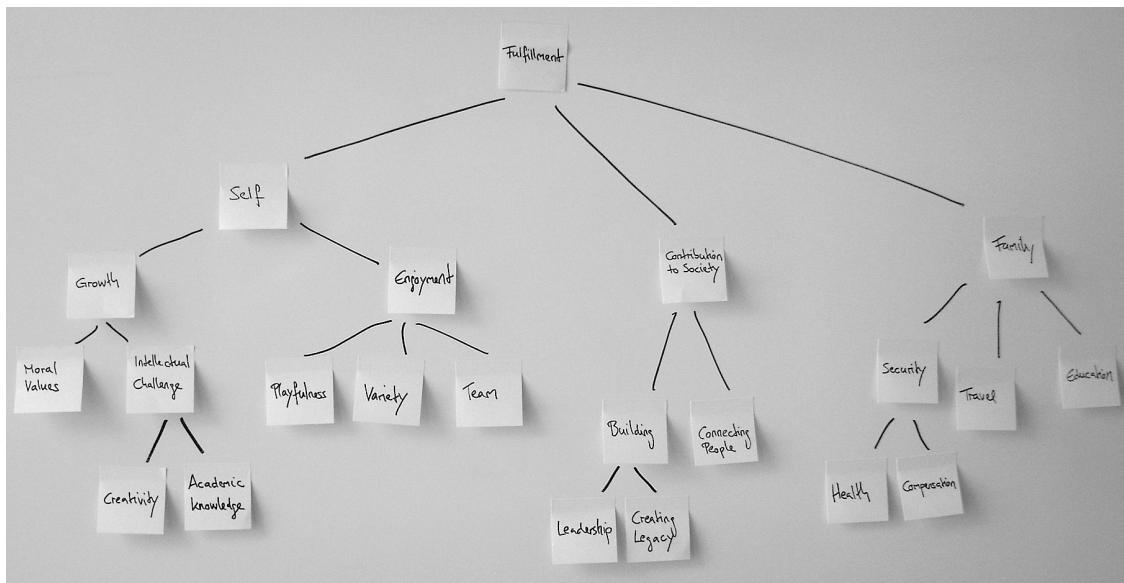
verge. (Think of a tree in your garden. The branches always split out; they never come together.) Since values take a tree structure, convergence is a clear indication of the presence of something that is not a value. Almost always, what the paths converge on is a means, rather than an end, or value. In the example, money is seen as a means to fulfill Recreation, Family, and Society values. Because means can serve many values, it is quite possible for paths to converge on means.

Money has no value, in itself, but derives its value entirely from what can be purchased with it. As such, it has no place in a value tree. Similarly, time is a means, rather than an end value, and derives its value entirely from how it is used. What should be done with means, like money and time? There are two possibilities. One is to leave them out and have a pure value tree. Often, however, we want to make sure we don't lose sight of important means and want to represent them in some way. In that case, the other pos-

sibility is to leave them in but indicate in some clear way that they are means, rather than ends [Keeney, 1996b]. This has been done in the next figure. To make clear that Money is not a value, it has been italicized, and its connections to other nodes have been indicated by lines with arrowheads that specify causal direction. The significance of means is in their causal relationships to one another and to values.



The figure below shows an example of a value tree, created by one of Ursina's clients who was working on a very challenging career decision. When she first came in, she had thought of only three issues that mattered for her decision, but this process helped her think more creatively, adding many more values, but also helped her get more clarity about everything that mattered to her. We then used the tree as a starting point to explore additional options (we did a value-focused search and used several creativity techniques [Keeney, 1996b]) and to construct a well-structured value-set for a decision matrix (see section [What next?](#) on the following page).



The evidence: research on the benefits of using this technique

In addition to helping us think creatively about values, value trees get us started thinking critically about values by organizing them in a logical manner. As shown above, they can help us spot means that have gotten mixed up with fundamental values, and they can also help keep us from counting the same value twice under different labels—a common error. In this way, a value tree can serve as a powerful tool. In fact, creating goal hierarchies is one of the most established methods to support

decision-making, and has been evaluated by several independent researchers in the field, with people who were making real career decisions [Aschenbrenner et al., 1980, Maurer, 1998, Teuscher, 2003, Paul, 1984]. Those studies have shown that constructing a goal hierarchy leads people to process more information [Aschenbrenner et al., 1980, Paul, 1984], come up with more specific, rather than generic, goals [Teuscher, 2003], and be more satisfied with their decisions [Paul, 1984].

Ursina's note for coaches, counselors, facilitators:

- During the first part of value generation, you can use your own preferred techniques. For example, I like to use image cards (e.g., VisualsSpeak) as a non-verbal stimulus variation technique. Other exercises that can trigger additional deep values are thinking about our biography, or about people we admire.
- If you are working with *couples or groups*, there is a wide range of possibilities of how you can bring the different perspectives together.
 - A color system clarifies where different parties agree or differ in their values: you can use one color for values that are shared by everyone, and different colors for goals/values that are only important to some parties. Again, sticky notes work very well for that purpose.
 - As a general rule, the more you want to give room to and draw attention to the differences between parties (e.g., for couples or groups who seem to agree on everything on the surface), the more time you may want to give each party to work on their own before bringing them back together. But there are no right or wrong ways to approach it—the two ends of the spectrum are:
 - * All together: have everybody work together from the start and create one joint tree.
 - * Separate as long as possible: create a full-blown tree with each party individually first, and then bring them together to merge their trees into one that they can all agree with. (Even if there is considerable disagreement between parties about individual values, it is usually possible to reach an agreement about the tree as a whole, as long as everybody finds their own values represented.)

I usually prefer a middle path of having everybody work individually at least for the first step of the open-ended questions (maybe during the entire value generation phase), and then bringing them together for the clustering and all the following steps. The color system works very naturally in that setting. Each party picks a color of sticky-notes and writes on those. During the clustering and the following steps, the values that everybody shares can be written on a new color.

What next?

After this exploratory phase, the values generated with this technique can serve as a basis for further steps in any decision process:

- Search for creative solutions: for example, Keeney (1996) describes a strategy for a value-focused search. We will be happy to email anybody a summary of his technique on request.
- If there was no “decision problem” to begin with, search for decision opportunities.
- Strategic planning: teams can use the tree as a starting point to formulate specific short-term and long-term objectives (e.g., S.M.A.R.T. goals [O’Neill, 2000]).
- A well-structured value set is necessary for any formal evaluation of different options. For that purpose the values generated in the tree will need to be distilled into a final smaller set, which should consist of values that are *fundamental* (not instrumental), *meaningful*, *positive*, *non-redundant*, *independent*, *complete*, *objective/quantifiable*, and *relevant*. This formalization is not always easy, but again, we will be happy to provide further instructions on how to move from a value tree to a well-structured set of values, and on how to create a decision matrix based on that final value set.

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