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## How Core Values Foster Resilience in Educators

By Elena Aguilar on February 4, 2018 8:43 PM

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Knowing and acting on core values is essential to being a resilient educator—and resilience is key to managing the continuous challenges that any educator faces. Before I introduce an activity to help you identify your values, let's define core values and their value.

### What Are Core Values?

Our *core values* are deeply held personal codes that reflect our ethics. They are often enduring beliefs that can be traced back to our families of origin or religious traditions. Examples of values include compassion, responsibility, hard work, justice, and community. Sometimes we use the terms *values* and *beliefs* interchangeably; they are aspects of the same idea.

Core values can change over time. You may have had different values as a young adult. Values are essentially beliefs, and beliefs are strongly held opinions. It's useful to remember that beliefs can change—our own beliefs, as well as those of others. For some, values may remain the same for many years, and that's okay too.

### What Role Do Core Values Play?

Our values orient, drive, and anchor us. We experience *integrity* when we act in alignment with them. When our actions are not aligned with our values, it doesn't feel good. We might say to ourselves, *This behavior isn't me*, which can indicate that our actions don't reflect a core value. When an inner voice says something like that, listen closely. Interestingly, psycho-neuroimmunologists find that our immune systems are strengthened or depleted by the degree of integrity with which we live our lives. When we act in ways that are out of alignment with our values, we physically don't feel good. This is why, when you are asked to do something you don't believe in, you might say, "It makes me feel sick to my stomach to have to do this," because your body literally feels unwell.

Research has found that core values play a key role in how educators build personal resilience. Resilient school leaders say that the process of "privately clarifying, publicly articulating, and consciously acting on" core values is a great source of strength in helping them face adversity and emerge stronger than before (Patterson and Kelleher, *Resilient School Leaders*. 2005, p. 51).

Your values can be a source of strength when you're aware of them. I know you have them, even if you're not crystal clear right now on what they are. We can also forget what our values are and find ourselves operating on autopilot, sometimes not in alignment with our values. This is why we need time to reflect on who we are and what we value, and also to talk with others about our values.

### How Do I Know What My Core Values Are?

Here's a process to identify your core values:

1. Download [Core Values.pdf](#) and read through them.
2. Circle the ten values that are most important to you.
3. Narrow that list of 10 down to five—the five that are most important to you.
4. Then narrow that down to three. These are your top three core values.

Do this annually to see if there's a change in your core values. Some people's values change over time—sometimes in response to the context they're in or life events.

Another way to recognize your core values is to notice when you feel especially triggered by someone else's behavior or something that happens. For example, if you highly value responsibility, then you might feel especially upset if someone doesn't take responsibility for their actions. We can also get clarity on our values when they are tested. If you highly value joy, then working in a school where there's a lot of negativity can make you more aware of your value. If someone violates one of your core values, sometimes you can recognize your value even more clearly.

### Reflecting on Core Values

Here are some prompts to help you reflect on your core values:

- Which of your core values feels easiest to uphold? Which feels hardest?
- If you had only one top value, which would that be? Why? How are your other values related to this top core value?
- Recall a time when you embodied or acted on a core value. You may have made a decision based on a core value. What happened? What made it possible, or even easy, for you to act on that value?

- Recall a time when your own actions violated one of your core values—when you didn't uphold a core value or made a decision that conflicted with a core value. What happened? When did you realize you were acting in opposition to a core value?
- Can you identify a time when your core values felt like they conflicted with each other? Perhaps you had to make a decision, but felt pulled between two options because of your core values. What happened?
- Recall a time when one of your core values was tested by other people at work. What happened? How did that experience help you understand your values better?

### Using Core Values for Personal and Community Development

Post your values where you can see them. In the morning, set an intention to act on a specific core value. Think about what it would look like for you to act in alignment with that value. Where might there be opportunities during the day to do so? At the end of the day, reflect on how you upheld your value. When did it feel easy to do so? When were you challenged? In the moments when you were challenged, was there another core value that you might have been unconsciously trying to uphold?

When you don't feel good about something that happened—someone says or does something that upsets you—see if there might be a connection with a core value. Perhaps one of these felt unappreciated or violated. Perhaps you violated your own core value.

Identifying and reflecting on your core values is an invaluable way to cultivate your resilience, and feel more effective and joyful in your work. Our core values help us remember who we are in the midst of so much busyness and so many decisions to make. Our core values can feel like an anchor or moral compass; we can feel grounded and affirmed by connecting with them.

The process of identifying core values and reflecting on them is useful to do with others. It's always the first activity I do when I'm coaching a new person—it helps me quickly understand who they want to be in the world. It's also powerful for groups to do together—for a team or a staff or any group that's convening and wants a meaningful way to connect to each other. If you're facilitating this activity with a group, make sure people have a chance to share the stories behind their values. We need to be cautious about assuming that others hold the same meaning for a value. For example, I've heard very different explanations around what the values "Family" and "Faith" mean to people. By providing time to share stories about values, people build understanding and empathy for each other.

Of the thousands of activities I have facilitated with educators, exploring core values is just about always the most appreciated of all. Conversations are rich and meaningful. The room buzzes with engagement and connection. And I always walk away with a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, to be an educator, and to be in community with others.

**I'd love to hear your experiences** using this activity and the impact it's had on you—whether you've done this individually or with a group. Please comment below or send me an email ([elena@brightmorningteam.com](mailto:elena@brightmorningteam.com)) with your story!

**Below:** some 350 coaches in the Minneapolis Public Schools share stories of their core values.



**Tags:** Core values integrity resilient educators

