

How To Deal With 'Values Conflicts' – By Russ Harris

Have you ever experienced a values conflict, where two different values pulled you in two different directions? Most of us have at times, and it's usually pretty stressful; we can easily get caught up in trying to figure out 'the right thing to do', and end up spending a lot of time inside our heads, worrying, ruminating, stressing out, or just going over and over the issue, trying to make a decision.

These types of conflicts present a major challenge for therapists, coaches, counsellors, clients, and ... well, actually, just about everyone ... and the inconvenient truth is, this is a HUUUUGE topic, way too big for one newsletter. And that is why I'm chunking it up into three parts. I hope you find it helpful.

PART 1: Is This A True 'Values Conflict'?

Before anything else, we need to get very clear about the differences between values, life domains, and goals. Once you truly understand these distinctions, a lot of so-called 'values conflicts' actually turn out to be something else: the real issue is not about conflicting values, but about how much time and energy to invest in different domains of life. So here's a quick reminder of the difference between life domains, goals, and values:

'Life domains' describe various areas or parts of my life – e.g. Work, study, family, friends, health, leisure, spirituality, parenting, marriage. (It's often useful to choose a life domain first, before you start working on values and goals within that domain.)

'Goals' describe what I want to have, complete, achieve, or do. Goals might include aiming to get a good job, or to earn more money, or learn a new skill, or complete a project on time, or buy a house, or lose weight, or get a girlfriend, or start exercising, or read more, or socialise more etc.

Some goals describe how I want to feel; these are called 'emotional goals'. Emotional goals might include aiming to have more thoughts and feelings of a certain type – e.g. happiness, self-confidence, self-esteem – or aiming to get rid of thoughts and feelings of a certain type – e.g. guilt, anxiety, painful memories etc.

So consider the life domain of 'work'. My goals in that domain might include the career I want to develop, the qualifications or experience I want to get, the job I'm searching for, the tasks or duties or roles I want to do well, the money I want to earn, the projects I want to complete, the promotion I want to get, the strategy I want to implement, the networks I want to build, the health and safety issues I want to address, etc.

In the life domain of health, goals might include the somewhat vague goals of 'improving health' or achieving 'good health' (if possible), or more specific goals such as 'to exercise daily', or 'to eat more fruit and vegetables' or 'to quit smoking' etc.

In the life domain of family, goals might include to spend quality time with the children, or save up for a family holiday, or go on a family holiday, or buy food and clothes for the family, or read the kids a bedtime story etc.

Values describe the personal qualities I want to embody in my actions; the sort of person I want to be; the manner in which I want to treat myself, others, and the world around me. So for example, in the life domain of family, my values might include being loving, kind, honest, and caring. In the life domain of work, my values might include being fair, trustworthy, reliable, and responsible. In the life domain of health, my values might be self-caring, self-encouragement and self-compassion.

Now once we're clear on the difference between life domains, values, and goals, a lot of apparent 'values conflicts' suddenly turn into something altogether different.

For example, take the common issue of 'family versus career'. Is this a values conflict? It appears to be, but it isn't. What we have named here - 'family versus career' – is not a pair of conflicting values; it is simply two important domains of life. And the issue here is not about values; it's about time management: how many hours a week do you invest in career, and how many hours a week do you invest in family?

Your values in the domain of work (e.g. being fair, trustworthy, reliable, and responsible) will not change whether you spend one hour a week at work or fifty hours a week at work. And likewise your values in the domain of family (e.g. being loving, kind, honest, and caring) will not change whether you spend one hour a week at home with the family, or fifty hours a week at home with the family.

With this clarity, you can then make a choice: given your current life situation, and the many conflicting demands on your time and energy, and the long term goals you have for both your career and your family, what is the best way to invest your time in these different domains?

Of course, there won't be a perfect answer. You will probably need to experiment with adjusting the amount of time and energy you invest in these domains – and see what works best for you. And of course, it doesn't have to be either one or the other. For example, if you choose to work late at the office, or to go away on a business trip, you can still put aside time in your workday to call home and read the kids a bedtime story.

Here's another example: 'caring for myself versus caring for others'. Notice there is no actual values conflict here – the value is very clearly 'caring'. The real issue here is: how much time and energy do I invest in caring for myself (e.g. in the life domains of health, work, leisure) and how much time and energy do I invest in caring for others (e.g. in the life domains of family, friends, parenting, marriage)? The value of 'caring' will be the same whether I am caring for myself or for others.

And again, it doesn't have to be either one on the other. For example, you can cook a healthy meal for the family dinner - which is both caring for yourself and also caring for your family. Or you can take the whole family for a bike ride, which is caring for both yourself and for them.

In summary then: if you encounter an apparent 'values conflict', the first step is to identify – are there truly two conflicting values here? Or is it actually an issue of how I invest my time and energy in two different domains of life?

If it's the latter, then you need to focus on goal-setting and action-planning: how are you going to plan and structure your time? What goals are you going to pursue and what actions are you going to take in each of those different domains of life, within the time you have allotted? You may need to experiment from day to day, week to week, month to month to find out what works best for you. And very often, there just won't be a perfect solution, so you'll need to unhook from the unhelpful mind chatter, and make room for the uncomfortable feelings, that are highly likely to show up, and be compassionate to yourself.

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\ ... what if it *is* actually a genuine values conflict? We'll get to that next.

PART TWO: A 'Formula' For Genuine Values Conflicts

In part 1 we looked at confusion between values, goals and life domains, and I concluded with this: if you encounter an apparent 'values conflict', the first step is to identify – are there truly two conflicting values here? Or is it actually an issue of how I invest my time and energy in two different domains of life?

So let's look at how to deal with a true values conflict. Suppose there is something going on at your workplace – e.g. bullying, harassment, victimization, dishonesty, corruption. And you can't decide whether to speak up about it or not. It seems that if you speak up, you'll be living your value of honesty – but there will be some very negative repercussions; you may lose your job, or become a target, which goes against your value of self-care. On the other hand, if you remain silent, you will keep your job, and avoid being a target, thus living your value of self-care – but you'll be going against your value of being honest.

What's the solution? Well, there's a basically formula I follow for genuine values conflicts. Let's go through it

Step 1: Identify the life domain where values conflict.

(Only work on one life domain at a time!)

In this case, the domain is work.

Step 2: Identify the two main values that conflict: A and B.

(Ensure they are values, not goals or 'shoulds' or rules.)

In this case, the values are A) honesty and B) self-care

Step 3: Think of values as being like the continents on a globe of the world.

(No matter how fast you spin the globe, you can't see all the continents at once. Some are always at the front, and others are always at the back. It's the same with values; they continually change position, throughout the day. Some come to the front, some go to the back.)

So in this case, throughout the day at work, there will be times honesty comes to the front, and times self-care comes to the front.

Step 4: Think of all the different ways - in this specific domain of life – that you can live value A by itself, value B by itself, and both values A and B simultaneously.

(Include everything from the smallest of actions to the largest of goals.)

So in this case, throughout the day at work, ways to live value A – honesty – include:

- *Honestly expressing your feelings and opinions in situations where there is no personal danger for doing so*
- *Being honest with yourself about how you are feeling, and how difficult the situation is*
- *Being honest in your dealings with clients, customers, colleagues and co-workers*

And throughout the day at work, ways to live value B – self-care – include:

- *Eating healthy snacks for morning and afternoon tea, instead of muffins and biscuits*
- *Being prudent and cautious about when and where and with whom you share your true feelings and opinions; picking and choosing who you do this with, in situations where it is safe for you to do so.*
- *Getting some fresh air and exercise with a walk at lunchtime*

And throughout the day at work, ways to live both value A and value B simultaneously – include:

- *Combining any of the above options, where practical to do so.*
- *Practising self-compassion: This involves being honest with yourself about the emotional pain and stress you are suffering – acknowledging how painful it is - while also treating yourself with kindness and caring (e.g. through saying kind, supportive things to yourself, or doing a mindful self-compassion exercise).*

Step 5: Is there a dilemma you need to address?

(A dilemma is a difficult situation where you have two options but they conflict with each other.)

So in this particular case, although you have addressed the values conflict – in that you have found ways to live both values in this important domain of life – you still face the dilemma of whether to ‘blow the whistle’ or not. There are no easy answers for dilemmas. If this is what you face, then I’d suggest you follow the steps in part 3.

PART THREE – Dealing With Dilemmas

We've all, at times, had to grapple with a difficult dilemma. 'Do I stay in this relationship - or leave?', 'Do I quit this job - or do I stay?', 'Do I enrol in that course - or the other one?', 'Do I have the operation - or not?', 'Do we try to have children - or not?', 'Do I buy this one - or the other one?', 'Do I want to live here - or there?'

When we're in these situations, our mind easily goes into overdrive, desperately trying to figure out what to do; to 'make the right decision'. The problem is, it can take days, weeks, months - or even years in some cases, such as unhappy marriages or unfulfilling jobs – before we finally choose one option over the other. And, in the meantime, we can easily spend our days wandering around in a thick psychological smog – endlessly pondering 'Do I or don't I?' – and, in the process, we make ourselves anxious or stressed, and we miss out on life, here and now. So, how can ACT help us?

Step 1: Acceptance

When my clients present their dilemmas, I start off by telling them, 'You probably will not make your final decision during our session today. It could happen – but it's extremely unlikely.' And if you are facing a major dilemma in your life today, this is almost certainly true for you; you are not likely to resolve it in the next 24 hours. Can you make room for this reality? Struggling with it will only make it worse.

Step 2: Costs & Benefits

Sometimes a dilemma can be resolved by the ages-old common-sense method of a 'cost-benefit analysis'. In other words, write down a list of all the benefits and all the costs for each option. If you've already done this and it hasn't helped, fair enough – at least you tried. But if you haven't done this – or if you've done it half-heartedly – or you've done it in your head but not on paper – then you should definitely give it a go. When you write it all down in black and white, that is a very different experience than thinking it through inside your head or talking it through with a friend - and it may help you finalise your decision. However, the inconvenient truth is this: the greater the dilemma, the less likely this method is to be helpful. (Why? Because if one option was obviously far better than the other, then you wouldn't have a dilemma in the first place!)

Step 3: No Perfect Solution

Next, recognise there is no perfect solution. (If there were, you wouldn't have had a dilemma in the first place). So whichever choice you make, you are likely to feel anxious about it - and your mind is likely to tell you, 'That's the wrong decision', then point out all the reasons why you shouldn't do it. If you're waiting until the day there's no feelings of anxiety, and no thoughts about making the wrong decision, you'll probably be waiting forever.

Step 4: There's No Way Not To Choose

Recognise that whatever your dilemma is, you're already making a choice. Each day you don't quit your job, you are choosing to stay. (Until the day you hand in your resignation, you are staying in that job.) Each day that you don't leave your marriage, you are choosing to stay. (Until the day you pack your bags and move out of the house, you are staying in that marriage.) Each day that you don't sign the consent form for the operation, you are choosing not to have surgery.

Step 5: Acknowledge Today's Choice

Following on from the above, kick off each day by acknowledging the choice you are making for this day. For example, say to yourself, 'Okay, for the next 24 hours, I choose to stay in the marriage' or 'For the next 24 hours, I choose to keep using contraceptives.'

Step 6: Take A Stand

Given your choice in step 5 above, what do you want to stand for in the next 24 hours? What values do you want to live by, in this area of life? If you're staying in the marriage for another day, what sort of partner do you want to be for that one day? If you're staying in your job for another day, what sort of employee do you want to be for that one day?

Step 7: Make Time To Reflect

Put aside time on a regular basis to mindfully reflect on the situation. The best way to do this is as in step 2: using a diary or a computer, write down the costs and benefits of each option, and see if anything has changed since last time you did this. You could also try to imagine what life might be like – both the positives and the negatives – a) if you went down one path, and b) if you went down the other path. For most people, ten to fifteen minutes 3 or 4 times a week is more than enough reflection time – but you can put aside as little or as much as you like. The key thing is, make it focused; in other words, don't try to do it at the same time as watching TV or doing housework or driving home or going to the gym or cooking dinner; just sit quietly with your pen and paper or a computer, and do nothing else but reflect, as above, for the allotted time.

Step 8: Name The Story

Throughout the day, your mind will try to pull you back into the dilemma, over and over again. But if this was truly helpful, you'd already have resolved your dilemma, wouldn't you? So practice 'naming the story'. For example, try saying to yourself, 'Aha! Here it is again. The "stay or leave" story. Thanks mind.' Then focus your attention on doing some meaningful, values-guided activity. You will probably find it helpful to remind yourself, 'I'll think about this later, in my scheduled reflection time'.

