



## What a Bunch of Flaming Idiots Taught Me About Values

By Deborah Grayson Riegel

When I received an email from the New Victory Theater announcing a family comedy show called “The Flaming Idiots”, my trigger finger clicked to buy four tickets faster than I could stop it. Little did I know that, in between the crackerjack juggling and zany shenanigans, I would experience a dramatic illumination of my personal values.

The three performers stepped on the stage and immediately announced that we, the audience, would play an integral part of the show. Having spent seven years performing with an improvisational comedy troupe both in college and in some of New York City’s top comedy clubs, I knew firsthand how important lively audience participation was to the success of the show. At that moment, I committed myself (and, unbeknownst to them, my husband and children) to volunteering ourselves in any way possible.

### **Value in Action: Contribution**

Our first opportunity came within the first five minutes. One member of the trio announced that he needed a child to stand in the middle of a machete juggling act. He cemented our inklings about the inherent risks of this by waving his 4 ½ fingered hand at the audience. What else would a mother do when her child had the chance of becoming temporarily famous but perhaps permanently earless? Well, this mother raised her hand wildly, and was pleased to see that her son Jacob joined her in her vigor. But alas, another child was selected. Jacob and I accepted this setback and clapped politely for the raven-haired girl who may or may not have gotten her bangs trimmed during the act.

### **Value in Action: Courtesy**

Our second opportunity arose almost immediately. A performer called for an adult volunteer willing to don a protective suit while a flame-thrower sat on his (or her! Please let it be her!) shoulders, while juggling fiery batons with the rest of the gang. Both Michael and I raised our hands – well, maybe I held his hand while I raised mine – and prayed to be picked.



## **Value in Action: Recognition**

They picked a ripped, bald gentleman in the front row who looked like he ate flaming idiots for lunch. Oh, well. We knew another opportunity would be around the corner.

And it was. During the second act, the Idiots proudly announced that one member of the troupe held the Guinness Book of World Records title for making the fastest sandwich -- with his feet. I heard Sophie and Jacob gasp -- a world record holder, right here???

## **Value in Action: Achievement**

Michael and I gasped: Foot sandwich???

## **Value in Action: Cleanliness**

And then the moment we'd be waiting for came: they needed their final volunteer (ooo! ooo!) who would be willing to eat (triple ooo!) the sandwich that this guy was going to make with his feet. Blech, of course, but all four of our hands shot up.

Oh, and one final detail he had to mention. The sandwich would be bologna and cheese.

And with that, our hands fell to our laps with a collective thud. In that moment, we all silently acknowledged that we were out of the running due to a core value that we simply couldn't, wouldn't mess around with.

## **Value in Action: Keeping Kosher**

In the Jewish tradition, mixing meat and dairy products is a no-no. Had it been a nice slice of avocado and some sprouts, or even a tuna melt, we could have been contenders. But as soon as the announcement was made that the foot sandwich included unkosher meat, the addition of cheese was just adding insult to injury. In the battle of core values, honoring our commitment to keeping kosher won out over our allegiance to core values like contribution, recognition and achievement.

Our core values direct us, help us make decisions, and drive us to act. They help us determine what's most important to us, with whom we want to associate with personally and professionally, and guide us in understanding why we make the choices that we make. It doesn't take a flaming idiot to see that most of us act both *in and out of alignment* with our

personal core values every single day, because these values are often in conflict with one another.

At work, you may value both collaboration and recognition, and find that you tend to credit the team more than honor your own need to be singled out. At home, perhaps you lean into the value of tradition (we have to have roasted turkey on Thanksgiving – everyone expects it!) more than indulging your value of innovation (what if we tried seared duck with a cranberry orange glaze?) And if you’ve ever tried to announce to a room of traditionalists that *this* year we’re trying something different – whether it’s duck or a staff retreat -- you know that there can be a high price to pay for bumping up against others’ core values without their permission.

We also pay a high price when we don’t even know what’s truly important to us or to the people we care about, and we risk personal and interpersonal stress when we do come to learn our own and others’ values, and then make choices that ignore or violate them. Management guru Peter F. Drucker, author of Management Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, proposes, “To be effective in an organization, a person’s values must be compatible with the organization’s values.” When there is a drastic mismatch, frustration brews and positive results become a pipe dream. And it doesn’t matter if your organization is your company or your family: if you want commitment and collaboration over crises and conflict, then both individual and collective values need to be aired.

Whether I’m coaching someone making a career transition, a corporate team that needs to collaborate more effectively, or a non-profit that wants more buy-in from its staff and volunteers, we start by identifying and articulating what core values are really important, and how these are being honored – or trampled on – in word and deed.

### **Value in Action: Pragmatism**

Ok, enough talk, more action. On the worksheets below, I’m giving you a **Five Step Plan to Put your Core Values into Action**. Unless you have a core value around procrastination, get started recognizing, responding to, and reorienting your choices around your core values today.

Besides, even a bunch of flaming idiots could do it.



## Putting Your Core Values into Action

### Step 1: Get Inside Yourself

Look at the values below, and select 10 or so that resonate for you. Pick ones that feel important to you now – not a wish, a want or a should. Be willing to tell the truth about what you actually value or love to do with your time. Some of these will come to you easily and quickly, others will require more thoughts. Be willing to try on some words that feel interesting, intriguing or challenging. Feel free to add words if they are not present.

- |  |                                       |  |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Achievement     | <input type="checkbox"/> Family       | <input type="checkbox"/> Pride             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adventure       | <input type="checkbox"/> Fun          | <input type="checkbox"/> Professionalism   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Autonomy        | <input type="checkbox"/> Helping      | <input type="checkbox"/> Providing         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beauty          | <input type="checkbox"/> Holiness     | <input type="checkbox"/> Recognition       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bliss           | <input type="checkbox"/> Impact       | <input type="checkbox"/> Relating with God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building        | <input type="checkbox"/> Improvement  | <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanliness     | <input type="checkbox"/> Independence | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration   | <input type="checkbox"/> Influence    | <input type="checkbox"/> Respect           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community       | <input type="checkbox"/> Innovation   | <input type="checkbox"/> Reward            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compassion      | <input type="checkbox"/> Inspiring    | <input type="checkbox"/> Risk              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Connecting      | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrity    | <input type="checkbox"/> Security          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contribution    | <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligence | <input type="checkbox"/> Serving           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy        | <input type="checkbox"/> Inventing    | <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creativity      | <input type="checkbox"/> Leading      | <input type="checkbox"/> Speed             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Devoting        | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning     | <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Elegance        | <input type="checkbox"/> Mastery      | <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emoting         | <input type="checkbox"/> Money        | <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encouraging     | <input type="checkbox"/> Observance   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tenderness        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellence      | <input type="checkbox"/> Perfection   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tradition         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experimentation | <input type="checkbox"/> Planning     | <input type="checkbox"/> Winning           |

## **Step 2: Get Specific**

Narrow your list to five by comparing each of your 10 values with each of the others and asking yourself, “which one of these *really* drives me?”

## **Step 3: Get Honest**

Now that you have your list of five, think about a time when you were acting in alignment with each of those values. How were you behaving? What were you thinking? How did it feel? Be as specific as possible.

Then think about a time when you were acting against your values, or you were confronted with someone who was “bumping up against” your values. How were you behaving, What were you thinking? How did it feel? Again, be as specific as possible.

Finally, reflect on your current situation in work and life. What values are you actively honoring on a regular basis? Which ones are getting ignored, pushed aside, or starved for attention?

## **Step 4: Get Busy**

For each value that isn’t getting the care it deserves, choose one action you can take or decision you will make in the next 30 days to better feed your needs. Write each one down, and create small, manageable steps to get there. Better yet, invite someone you trust to help you stay accountable to yourself.

## **Step 5: Get Connected**

What have you realized? What value are you working on? I’d welcome the chance to be a part of your process. Please email me at [info@elevatedtraining.com](mailto:info@elevatedtraining.com).