

What do I stand for when it's uncomfortable?

Values as a guiding principle

Theme:

Values and decision-making

Application:

Any difficult lab decision or conversation

Introduction

Your values are what your lab members can rely on you for: the principles you hold whether or not anyone is watching. This worksheet uses one situation you are facing now as a way to find out what you actually stand for, and whether you are bringing your values into your words and actions in the lab.

Step 1 – Choose a situation that is testing you

Pick one decision or conversation you are currently avoiding or uncertain about. This is your test case for the rest of the sheet.

Something challenging I am facing right now:

If you're not sure what to fill in above, maybe one of these is relevant:

Giving difficult feedback to a student or staff member

Deciding who gets authorship on a paper

Dealing with a conflict between two lab members

What makes this situation uncomfortable for you right now?

Step 2 – Identify your values

What is a value?

A value is a principle you are willing to act on, even when it costs you something. It is what you want to govern how you behave, especially when the easy option or everyone else's view points the other way. It is more than a goal you complete or a wish to be hoped for. A single word (honesty, fairness) is a starting point; the real test is whether you can act on it, which Step 4 will invite you to do.

Write down three to five values that are in play in this situation.
Single words or short phrases.

Stuck? Examples to prompt your thinking: honesty, fairness, courage, integrity, accountability, compassion, respect, transparency, directness, high standards, loyalty, care for the group, generosity, kindness, hard work, politeness.

Now circle the two that are most at stake in this specific situation.

Two is the working set. More than two and the focus is gone.

Step 3 – Name the tension

Hard decisions are sometimes hard because two of your values seem to pull against each other, or your guiding value is pulling against someone else's.

How are the two circled values influencing your behaviour?

Who else's values are influencing you and why?

Step 3 – Name the tension *(continued...)*

What is the impact of leaving the situation unresolved?

**Make a decision: which value or values will you continue/start to allow to guide you here?
 How will you reconcile them?**

Step 4 – Translate your value(s) into action

For the value(s) you chose to lead with, name the specific, observable action(s) it/they require(s) from you this week to address this situation. Something you can do, say, or decide.

Examples using different values to show the translation:

My value	The specific action it requires this week
Fairness <i>(in the context of a conflict)</i>	I will speak to both people separately before forming a view, and ask each of them the same three questions.
Honesty <i>(in the context of a struggling student)</i>	I will tell the student directly this week that their progress is below what the project needs, with two specific examples.

Now complete your own

My value	The specific action it requires this week

To double-check the specificity of your action: would someone else recognise the value driving it? If you cannot name a specific action, the value may not yet be guiding your leadership. It is only describing your wish.

Step 5 – Plan the next steps

Turn your values-based action into concrete steps.

The conversation or decision I need to make:

Who I need to involve, and in what order:

The one thing I have been avoiding saying or doing:

What do I fear will happen if I do it?

How is my fear misleading me?

Cost of acting now vs. cost of continuing to wait:

I will take the first step by: (date)

Closing reflection

Zoom out from the single situation.

This decision is one instance. Where else do/does the value(s) need to show up in your leadership?

Complete this after you have acted.

Review date:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well did you act in line with your value(s)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. What did you learn about how you lead when it is uncomfortable?

3. What would you do earlier next time?

4. What will you do differently as a standing habit, not only for this situation?

Further reading

1. Morela Hernandez and Catherine Summers, *'Effective Leaders Articulate Values – and Live by Them'* (2024) <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/effective-leaders-articulate-values-and-live-by-them/> (accessed 16 June 2026).
2. Robert Glazer, *'Identify Your Core Values to Make Better Leadership Decisions'* (2025) <https://hbr.org/2025/09/identify-your-core-values-to-make-better-leadership-decisions> (accessed 16 June 2026).
3. Simon Sinek, *'Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action'* (2009).
4. Brené Brown, *'Dare to Lead'* (2018).

Want to go deeper?

EMBO Lab Leadership is a course designed specifically for life scientists. Our workshops give you practical tools to work through beliefs like these – and to build a research environment where your team can do their best work.