



Research Article

Value-Based Work Motivation: A Multilevel Examination of Personal Values, Organizational Context, and Relational Dynamics

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ABSTRACT



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The article aims to investigate value-based work motivation as a multi-level phenomenon shaped by individual, organizational, and relational factors. Drawing on goal theory, self-regulation, and value research in organizational behaviour, the present study conceptualizes work motivation as a time-linked configuration of three processes, namely- affective, cognitive, and behavioural, organized around individuals' goals and value commitments. At the level of the individual; personal values, moral commitments, goal hierarchies, personality traits, and a sense of purpose or calling are proposed to underpin the experience of meaningful work and persistent effort. At the organizational level, espoused values, culture, leadership style, HR practices, and social climate are seen to provide the structural and symbolic context in which motivation develops. Further, relational and contextual mechanisms—including supervisor–subordinate relationships, team norms, peer influences, and broader societal norms—are also seen to serve as proximal channels through which values are further communicated, interpreted, and enacted in day-to-day work.

Using a mixed-method design (quantitative survey plus qualitative interviews), the present study examines how value congruence between individuals and their organizations relates to motivational outcomes such as work engagement, organizational commitment, and ethical behaviour. and beyond traditional extrinsic incentives, with relational factors partially mediating this relationship. Qualitative findings elaborate how employees make sense of value alignment and misalignment and how they navigate value conflicts in practice. The article concludes by discussing implications for leadership, HR policy, and the design of ethical, value-rich organizational environments, as well as directions for future research on values and motivation.

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Introduction

Motivation has long been central to organizational behaviour research, yet classical theories have often treated it as a largely individual centric, intra-psychic phenomenon shaped by needs, drives, or external rewards (Locke and Gary, 1990). More recent developments highlight the role of values—relatively stable beliefs about what is important and desirable—as foundational to how individuals set goals, interpret work demands, and sustain effort over time (Milton 1967). This article extends that line of inquiry by focusing on *value-based work motivation* and situating it within a broader multilevel framework.

Work motivation can be defined as a time-linked set of reciprocal affective, behavioural, and cognitive processes and actions that are organized around an individual's goals (Malueg et al, 1973). Goals, here are conceptualized as mental representations of desired end-states embedded within a hierarchically organized networks of higher-order values and self-standards. Against this backdrop, values do not merely “colour” motivation; rather they are seen to form what counts as a worthwhile goal, how

performance is evaluated, and what forms of behaviour are experienced as authentic and morally acceptable.

Despite substantial advances in the study of values and ethics in organizational behaviour literature, research on motivation has often focused on relatively narrow constructs—such as *intrinsic* versus *extrinsic* motives (Ryan and Deci, 2000) or engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker)—without fully integrating the role of value congruence across multiple levels of analysis. This article seeks to address that gap by asking how individual-level values, organizational-level value systems, and relational/contextual dynamics jointly shape value-based work motivation.

More specifically, the present study addresses three guiding questions. Firstly, how do individual differences in personal values, moral commitments, and sense of purpose relate to work motivation? Secondly, how do organizational-level factors—such as espoused values, leadership style, and HR practices—support or undermine value-based motivation? And thirdly, through what relational mechanisms (for example, supervisor–subordinate relationships, team norms) are values communicated, interpreted, and translated into motivated behaviour?

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To answer these questions, the present study presents a multilevel conceptual model, followed by an empirical study using survey and interview data from employees across multiple organizations. The findings contribute to theory by articulating value-based work motivation as a dynamic, contextually embedded process and to practice by offering insights into how organizations can foster meaningful and ethically grounded motivation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Work Motivation as Goal-Directed, Value-Embedded Action

The starting point of the motivational literature is the notion that work motivation involves goal-directed self-regulation behaviour over time (Ruth 2002). Individuals are seen to form, pursue, and revise work goals within hierarchical structures in which higher-order values guide lower-level objectives and behaviours (Powers and Powers, 1973). For instance, an employee who values benevolence may prioritize mentoring colleagues, while one who values achievement may focus on outperforming peers.

Values thus serve *three* interrelated functions. First, they are seen to provide an evaluative standard for judging goals and outcomes as desirable or undesirable. Second, they offer a source of meaning, linking day-to-day tasks to broader life purposes. Third, they provide a normative basis for moral commitments that sustain effort and persistence even under adverse conditions.

2.2 Individual-Level Factors

At the level of the individual, value-based work motivation is seen to be shaped by several interrelated factors.

Central factors are seen to be Personal values and moral commitments. Research on value systems suggests that individuals differ in the relative importance they assign to domains such as self-transcendence, self-enhancement, conservation, and openness to change (Schwartz, 1992). These value profiles affect which types of work are experienced as meaningful and which forms of rewards are motivating. Moral commitments add an obligatory dimension to values, creating a sense of “oughtness” that can sustain effort even when extrinsic incentives are low.

Goal hierarchies and self-standards translate values into concrete intentions. Higher-order values are operationalized through mid-level and proximal goals, which in turn shape day-to-day behaviour (Austin and Vancouver, 1996). Self-standards—internalized expectations about what it means to be a good worker, colleague, or leader—serve as benchmarks for self-evaluation. Motivation is partly driven by the desire to reduce discrepancies between current performance and these internal standards (Carver and Scheier, 2001).

Personality traits such as conscientiousness and openness to experience also play a crucial role. Conscientious individuals may be more likely to persist in goal pursuit and to internalize organizational standards, whereas open individuals may be more attuned to values of autonomy, creativity, and growth (Judge and Ilies, 2002). Personality does not determine values but may shape how they are expressed in behaviour.

Lastly, a sense of purpose and calling can imbue work with a deep sense of significance that goes beyond instrumental rewards (Wrzesniewski et al, 1997). Individuals who experience their work as a calling often integrate vocational goals with broader life narratives, which can lead to high engagement but also to vulnerability when organizational realities clash with moral ideals.

2.3 Organizational-Level Factors

Organizational-level factors create the structural and symbolic context in which value-based motivation unfolds.

Espoused organizational values and culture articulate what the organization claims to stand for (Schein 2010). When these values are internalized by members and are supported by consistent practices, they provide a powerful source of meaning and identity. Conversely, gaps between espoused and enacted values may also erode trust and motivation.

Leadership style (especially value-based and ethical leadership) is a primary mechanism through which organizational values are communicated and enacted (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Leaders who model integrity, articulate a clear moral purpose, and demonstrate care for followers can foster value congruence and intrinsic motivation. By contrast, purely transactional leadership may encourage performance while neglecting ethical and value-related concerns.

HR practices, performance management, and reward systems institutionalize particular value priorities. For example, systems that exclusively reward short-term financial outcomes signal the primacy of instrumental achievement values, whereas systems that recognize collaboration, learning, and social impact communicate a broader set of priorities (Brown and Ostroff 2004). When HR practices are aligned with espoused values, they enhance credibility; when they are inconsistent, they generate cynicism.

Motivation is also seen to be shaped by the social climate—encompassing perceptions of trust, justice, and psychological safety (Edmondson 1999). A climate perceived as fair and psychologically safe encourages employees to invest themselves, voice concerns, and take initiative. Such climates are particularly important when employees’ values prompt them to question unethical or harmful practices.

2.4 Relational and Contextual Factors

Relational and contextual factors constitute the proximal channels through which value messages are interpreted and enacted.

Supervisor–subordinate relationships, often conceptualized in terms of leader–member exchange (LMX), influence how organizational values are experienced at the individual level (Graen and Bien, 1995). High-quality exchanges characterized by trust and mutual respect facilitate value communication, support, and coaching, thereby strengthening value-based motivation.

Team norms and peer influences also play a key role. Teams develop shared expectations about acceptable behaviour, effort norms, and ethical standards. These norms can reinforce or undermine formal values and can shape the extent to which individuals feel able to act in line with their personal value (Chatman and Flynn, 2005).

Finally, broader societal norms and institutional pressures form the outer layer of context. Legal regulations, professional codes, and cultural assumptions about work shape which values are seen as legitimate or desirable in a given context (Scott 2008). Organizations and individuals are also seen to operate within these constraints, negotiating tensions between local practices and wider normative expectations.

2.5 A Multilevel Model of Value-Based Work Motivation

Bringing these elements together, the article proposes that value-based work motivation emerges from the interaction of:

- Individual-level value structures, goal hierarchies, and traits;
- Organizational-level values, leadership, HR systems, and climate; and

- Relational-level processes in supervisor–subordinate and team relationships;
 - all embedded within broader societal and institutional contexts.

When personal and organizational values are congruent, and when relational contexts support authenticity and psychological safety, employees are more likely to experience work as meaningful, to internalize organizational goals, and to exert sustained, ethically grounded effort. When values are misaligned or when relational contexts are characterized by distrust or fear, motivational processes may be undermined, leading to disengagement, moral distress, or withdrawal.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework, the empirical part of the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do personal values, moral commitments, and sense of purpose relate to self-reported work motivation and engagement?
2. How does perceived value congruence between individuals and their organizations relate to work motivation and outcomes such as commitment and ethical behavior?
3. To what extent do relational factors (for example, quality of leader–member exchange, team norms, and perceived climate) mediate or moderate the relationship between value congruence and work motivation?
4. How do employees describe and make sense of value alignment and value conflict in their work lives?

From these questions, the study derives several hypotheses, including:

H1: Personal endorsement of pro-social and intrinsic values (for example, benevolence, self-direction) is positively associated with work engagement and intrinsic motivation.

H2: Perceived value congruence between the individual and the organization is positively associated with work motivation and organizational commitment.

H3: The quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships (LMX) mediates the relationship between perceived value congruence and work motivation.

H4: Perceived organizational climate of trust, justice, and psychological safety amplifies the positive effect of value congruence on motivation.

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-method design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. The quantitative component tests the proposed relationships between values, value congruence, relational factors, and motivational outcomes. The qualitative component explores how employees narrate their experiences of value alignment and conflict, providing depth and contextual nuance.

4.2 Sample and Procedure

Survey data were collected from employees working in multiple organizations across sectors in the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, formally known as Jammu and Kashmir Administrative services (JKAS). Participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire that included measures of personal values, perceived organizational values, value congruence, leadership style, relational quality, climate perceptions, motivation, and outcomes such as engagement and commitment.

A subsample of respondents was subsequently invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews

focused on participants' experiences of meaningful work, episodes of value conflict, perceptions of leadership and organizational culture, and strategies for navigating tensions between personal and organizational values.

Participation was voluntary and confidential. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review body, and all participants provided informed consent.

4.3 Measures

Personal values were assessed using a standardized value inventory based on Schwartz's (1992) framework, capturing dimensions such as self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation.

Perceived organizational values were measured by asking respondents to rate the extent to which their organization emphasizes particular values (for example, innovation, social responsibility, profit, integrity). Value congruence was operationalized as the perceived fit between personal and organizational values.

Leadership style was assessed using scales capturing value-based and ethical leadership behaviors (for example, articulating a vision, demonstrating integrity, showing concern for followers; see [Brown and Trevino 2006](#)).

Leader–member exchange (LMX) was measured using a standard LMX scale capturing mutual trust, respect, and obligation ([Graen and Bien, 1995](#)).

Team norms and peer influences were assessed through items on shared expectations about effort, cooperation, and ethical conduct.

Organizational climate variables included perceptions of trust, fairness (organizational justice), and psychological safety ([Edmondson 1999](#)).

Work motivation and engagement were measured using established scales capturing intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and work engagement (for example, Vigor, dedication, absorption) ([Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004](#)).

Outcomes included organizational commitment, self-reported ethical behaviour (for example, willingness to report wrongdoing), and intentions to stay or leave the organization.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using regression and mediation/moderation techniques to test hypothesized relationships between values, congruence, relational factors, and motivation. Additional analyses explored potential sectoral or demographic differences.

Qualitative interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Themes were identified concerning experiences of value alignment, value conflict, leadership influence, and strategies for preserving integrity and motivation in challenging contexts.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Findings

Analyses indicated that personal endorsement of intrinsic and pro-social values (particularly self-transcendence and openness to change) was significantly associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation and work engagement. Employees who strongly valued benevolence, universalism, and self-direction reported greater meaning in their work and greater willingness to invest discretionary effort.

Perceived value congruence between individuals and organizations emerged as a robust predictor of work motivation and organizational commitment, even after controlling for demographic variables and personality traits. Employees who

perceived a high degree of fit between their own values and those of their organization reported stronger identification with the organization and higher levels of engagement.

Leader–member exchange partially mediated the effect of value congruence on motivation. Individuals who reported both high value congruence and high-quality relationships with their supervisors were especially likely to experience high motivation, suggesting that relational processes help translate congruence into psychological investment.

Perceptions of organizational climate—especially trust, fairness, and psychological safety—strengthened the positive relationship between value congruence and motivation. In climates characterized by high trust and psychological safety, the slope of the congruence–motivation relationship was steeper, indicating that supportive climates amplify the benefits of value alignment.

5.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative interviews provided vivid illustrations of how employees understand and navigate value dynamics at work. Participants who experienced strong alignment between their values and organizational values often described their work as “an extension of who I am” or as contributing to a “greater good.” They emphasized the importance of leaders who “walk the talk” and of colleagues who share similar commitments.

Conversely, participants who experienced value conflict described feelings of moral distress, disillusionment, and, in some cases, burnout. Conflict often arose when formal espoused values (for example, a commitment to patient care, student development, or social responsibility) clashed with informal norms or resource constraints. Interviewees recounted situations where they felt pressured to compromise quality or ethics in order to meet performance targets.

Relational factors emerged as crucial moderators of these experiences. Supportive supervisors and teams could buffer the negative effects of broader organizational misalignment by creating “pockets” of congruent practice, where employees felt able to uphold their values. In contrast, unsupportive or authoritarian leadership exacerbated value conflicts, making it difficult for employees to act in line with their moral commitments.

Finally, several participants described active strategies for coping with misalignment, including reframing their roles, seeking allies, advocating for change, or, in some cases, exiting the organization. These narratives underscore that value-based work motivation is dynamic and negotiated rather than static.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study support a multilevel account of value-based work motivation. At the individual level, personal values and a sense of purpose shape the kinds of work that employees find meaningful and the goals they are willing to pursue. At the organizational level, espoused values, leadership practices, and HR systems communicate what is valued and rewarded, thereby shaping the opportunities for value expression. At the relational level, supervisor–subordinate relationships, team norms, and climate determine whether employees feel safe and supported to act in accordance with their values.

The central contribution of the study is to show that value congruence is not a purely static property of person–organization fit but is continually constructed and reconstructed through ongoing interactions. Leaders and peers play a particularly important role in interpreting and enacting values, and supportive climates can amplify the positive effects of

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