



First Newsletter of the Working Group — Core Values at Work —

Welcome to the new Working Group — Core Values at Work. We invite you to explore this direction, share your insights, and if you are interested, join us in furthering this work.



“The most beautiful thing is knowing all of the other workers, chatting with them, learning about their lives and their experiences. I would try to encourage them and say, ‘Do not worry, paisano.’”
— *Farmworker*

“We are not replaceable. Our safety is the number-one priority. We do not have a problem working. That is a big misconception people have. We have a problem with the way we are treated. We just want to be treated with respect.”¹
— *Warehouse worker*



Introduction

The meaning of *Core Values at Work*

Work is one of the most important human activities that contributes to shape and develop our society. First and foremost, work must provide the means to food, shelter, clothing, health and the fulfilling of responsibilities. But once these essential requirements are met, work has the potential to serve other human needs, including fulfilling one’s *core values*.² Because of this, work has to be based on core values that give sense and meaning to it, that align with the individual and collective values that drive our lives. These values are not only ethical and moral, but also social and cultural; they are intrinsically related to the factors that promote health across the globe, including family, community, dignity and personal excellence.² It is a challenge to define these values in greater depth because they are the human and often personal experiences that underpin the entire field of occupational health. The objective of health and safety is not only to prevent the negative effects of work on people’s health, safety and work ability, but also to build healthy working conditions and a work culture that promotes good health, motivation, wellbeing and our good work.

¹ Staff. Voices from the front lines. New York Times. 2021.

² Nicholas RM. Worker values, culture and community – Values communication that goes directly to workers and supports wellbeing. Towards Better Work and Wellbeing, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Proceedings of the International Conference, Helsinki, Finland. 2010. p. 87-91.

Relevance of core values to the present situation at the workplace

There is a craving amongst people to know and better understand the greater meaning of the work they are doing and experiencing every day. However, the continuous increase in social inequalities, the persistence of unethical conduct by many stakeholders and employers, and the uncontrolled epidemic of physical and mental suffering have created a growing concern. These inequalities have prompted people to recognize the urgent need for a positive attitude toward workers' health in society.

To meet this need, more emphasis must be given to the promotion of healthy work conditions and wellbeing. This is in addition to and in collaboration with the prevention of unhealthy conditions that cause accidents, diseases and suffering. In other words, the scope of occupational health has to be enlarged to give more emphasis on its social and moral dimensions, including the role of core values.

History

Special Sessions on *Work and Spirituality*

The seeds of this Working Group date back to 2015 at the ICOH 31st International Congress in Seoul (South Korea). A Special Session was organized under the sponsorship of the ICOH Committee on Education with great success with the title *Work and Spirituality*. The word *spirituality* can be interpreted in many different ways. Here, it is offered — not in a religious sense — but instead, as a way to view the whole person, going beyond the material aspects of our lives. It embraces our deep feelings and beliefs that carry us through the day — the meaning of work, our core values of respect and dignity, and our relationships with family, friends and community.

The event was so popular that a large number of participants could not enter the crowded session which was standing-room-only.³ Speakers from international and national organizations, academic institutions and other fields, explained why the spiritual dimension of work and health is becoming an important topic in the field of occupational health.

At the next ICOH International Congress in Dublin (Ireland) in 2018, another Special Session was held with the title, *Work and Spirituality — New approaches and ideas*. It was organized in the same way with speakers from different continents (Africa, Asia, America and Europe) who examined spirituality from different points of view.⁴ However, this session did not raise as much interest as compared to the previous Congress in Seoul. The organizers attributed this difference to the fact that in Asian



Dr. Ashish Mittal presenting at the Special Session – Work and Spirituality (ICOH Dublin 2018)

³ Summary Report of this Special Session in the ICOH Newsletter Vol 14, Number 3, December 2016. p.15-18.

⁴ Summary Report of this Special Session in the ICOH Newsletter Vol 16, Number 3, December 2018. p.12-14.



countries, the concept of spirituality is more integral to their culture. This is not the case for occidental countries where the word *spirituality* still suffers from bias linked to religions and sectarian tendencies.

A new name and a new workshop on *Core Values at Work*

This experience of how different cultures interpreted the word spirituality, prompted the ICOH Education organizers to change the title of their sessions to *Core Values at Work*, while still addressing how each individual experiences themselves through their life and work.



Members of the Workshop – Core Values at Work (International Conclave - Mumbai 2020)

At the International Conclave on Occupational Health 2020, held in Mumbai (India), a workshop with this new title was organized by ICOH Education in the ICOH Scientific Program. Considering the difference in attendance at this Conclave compared to the ICOH congresses, this workshop raised enthusiastic interest among the

participants which confirmed that this topic needs to be investigated further.⁵

Sponsorship in the ICOH Committee on Education

From the beginning, the Education Committee supported the idea that in the future, these new, personal dimensions of occupational health should be included as stock knowledge of OSH professionals. This pioneering attitude helped us to move past potential bias towards the meaning of spirituality and open new avenues to enlarge the scope of occupational health.

With this perspective, the Committee held a meeting during the Conclave in Mumbai 2020 and established the new Working Group — *Core Values at Work*. Though the name has changed, the scope remains the same — to honor, protect, and promote each worker as a whole person, helping each worker to experience all of themselves through their work.

Where we want to go

The Working Group has the opportunity to build awareness about core values and their importance at work. The Group can work both independently and in collaboration with other organizations, exploring established and new ways to bring core values into each day's work. It can help build awareness among workers, leaders, and OSH professionals. And ultimately, it can bring tools to workers so that they can experience the rewards of living their personal investment in their work.

⁵ Summary Report of this Workshop in the ICOH Newsletter Vol 18, Number 2, August 2020. p.15-17.



Working with other groups

Core values are part of our everyday experience — including our work experience. The Working Group has the opportunity to explore and share these values and experiences with other OSH organizations. Core Values at Work can potentially collaborate with committees and groups within ICOH in a variety of fields, as well as with outside organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). It may also coordinate with other conferences and workshops, such as the International Wellbeing at Work (WAW) series of conferences. These are only a few, formal examples.

However, informal collaborations can be equally effective. Two or three people can come together to promote and champion core values where they work, to protect the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of all workers.

Working with other programs

The Core Values group can coordinate with national programs such as Total Worker Health® at the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Core values can also be applied and shared across other disciplines. For example, collaboration may be possible with researchers from the Netherlands and other countries, whose work explores the *capability approach*, recognizing that what people are capable of, are actually able to do, is crucial as they strive for their wellbeing.⁶ Patient values and worker values are also related and essential in both health care and worker wellbeing. And in terms of communication, values can be promoted through the clarity and quality of information across many disciplines, including occupational health, by using clear and simple language that is both personal and experienced.

If you or your organization would like to explore future collaboration, please let us know.

Building awareness within OSH about the importance of Core Values at Work

Because core values are both personal and shared, it is important that the working group remains open in its exploration of values. Rather than limiting the definition of core values, the group can invite multiple perspectives. Different peoples from diverse regions may share the same values and yet express them differently across different cultures. Similarly, occupational health and safety, psychosocial, neurological, philosophical and economic discussions of values can be considered.



Ultimately, it is each worker who will determine what their core values mean and organically bring their personal knowledge to the workplace. The Working Group can help with this process by pursuing a variety of activities. The Group can offer new approaches in education and training of OSH professionals by taking into account the importance of core values within other

⁶ Van der Klink J.J.L. *et al.* Sustainable employability – Definition, conceptualization, and implications: A perspective based on the capability approach. *Scand J Work Environ Health*; 42(1):71–79. doi:10.5271/sjweh.3531. 2016.



safety disciplines. It can show how essential core values are to traditional health and safety practices, demonstrating how people benefit by pursuing their life values as they commit to doing safe, good work. It can provide tools for workers, encouraging them to bring their values to work to improve job satisfaction as they experience their values through their work. In addition, the Working Group has the potential to open new avenues for research, education and work practices.

Core values in the time of Covid

Invisible workers — Essential workers⁷

Our core values carry us through the different conditions and times of our lives. How we relate to our personal values may vary as the conditions vary. Our understanding of them may change, as well. But through it all, these values help us through difficult times — familiar markers that can guide us through the chaos.

Right now, a tragic pandemic is challenging us not only physically, but in all aspects of who we are. This pandemic has shown us and reconfirmed for us what is essential in our lives — our value of life, the quality of life, family, friends, and the essentials of dignity and respect.

As a result, people are seeing more clearly what work — and workers — are essential to our survival. First and foremost, we can see how totally dependent we are upon our health care workers — doctors, nurses, aides, medical support staff, maintenance workers — everyone. The sacrifices these workers make on our behalf are indescribable. In addition to providing the crucial health care itself, these people help bring dignity and respect to their patients.

And beyond these health workers, people are now seeing others as essential — the long list of people who provide our food, is just one example.

But here is the challenge — before the pandemic, many of these same essential workers were invisible workers. They were the underpaid farm laborers picking crops, the farmers, the truck drivers bringing the food to market, the people stocking store shelves or setting up an open-air market and selling the food to those who need it. These are the same store clerks that before Covid, some customers never made eye contact with.

People in so many different jobs were viewed as invisible or “less than” because of their job or their position. Essentially, *anyone* can be treated as invisible by their leaders, their customers, or even complete strangers — because of their job type, job position, gender, skin color, race, culture, religion, social division, or economic class.

These invisible workers work across all professions — the road crews, garbage collectors, housekeepers, restaurant waiters and kitchen staff, maintenance and cleaning crews, and the

⁷ Nicholas RM. Invisible workers and essential workers – Core values in the time of Covid. Health Safety and Wellbeing [Internet], <http://www.robinnicholas.com/index.php/core-values-in-the-time-of-covid/> 2020.



unrecognized support staff within a wealthy company or government agency. The list of invisible professions goes on and on. The Whitehall II Study⁸ shows that even in a formal organization — the burden of not being seen or heard, of being viewed as lower or less than someone higher up, of experiencing the loss of dignity and respect — weighs heavily on people’s physical health and the human spirit. Add to this a pandemic and people’s fear for their health, economic security, and their ability to take care of their family. The result is increased stress and illness, more heart disease, and a loss of mental and emotional wellbeing.

So here is the challenge for us as human beings in this time of Covid: After this pandemic has passed or has at least greatly improved,

*Will we remember this new-found perspective that all workers are essential —
or will we let people become invisible again?*

Martin Luther King, a civil rights leader in the U.S., said it so simply, “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.”

As part of our core values, all of us seek dignity and respect through our work. After the pandemic improves and we reach what people call the *new normal*, we have an opportunity to determine what that new normal looks like. How it materializes and how we express it to each other will vary from country to country and culture to culture. Regardless, the opportunity is here to reconfirm just how much we are all connected and depend upon each other.



How you can get involved

We invite you to explore Core Values at Work with us. If you would like to contribute to the direction of the group, pose questions, or join the Working Group, please let us know. You can email us at:

Core Values at Work	
Michel Guillemin	Robin Nicholas
Frank van Dijk	Ashish Mittal
welcome@corevaluesatwork.org	
<i>Someone from the team will be happy to answer your email.</i>	