

# The Molecule that Runs Your Life

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Today I want to introduce you to a model of human motivation which you've probably never heard of unless you've read my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust* or you've attended one of my leadership seminars.

My former coaching clients are also familiar with it, because it's a standard fixture in my coaching and mentoring engagements. I call it the VBP molecule. It's not a chemical molecule as such. It's a psychological cluster of cognitive and emotional elements which link up (like chemical elements in a physical molecule) to act as a unit.

VBP molecules figure prominently in my work because, in my view of things, they run everything in our lives – our decisions, our reaction to what happens, our buying habits, our choice of friends, our priorities, our hobbies, what we volunteer for, our style of leadership. Literally everything. And most importantly, they run our motivations.

And since motivation is such a critical concern for anyone in leadership, what we uncover in today's podcast will unquestionably upsize your leadership.

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Sometimes a client will say to me, "Too many of our people are not motivated." My standard response is, "There's no such person." As human beings, everything which we do or don't do is the result of some motivation – even if it's a motivation to do nothing.

Therefore, the issue is not that the client's workers are unmotivated. They are simply not motivated to act in the way that the client expects. Instead, they are motivated to take some other course of action.

Why, then, are they motivated to choose the course which they have taken? When I ask clients this question, their most frequent response is, "They don't have the right values." And candidly, at one time I might have answered the same way myself. But my experiences in C-Suite coaching have led me to a different perspective. Here's how that happened.

Early on I found myself working with partnerships that had gone bad. A once top-performing company was now in the throes of stagnation, or even decline, because the partners no longer saw eye to eye. What I discovered in these instances was that the partners often shared the same values. They simply had different priorities as to how these values should be implemented. And they held to their priorities passionately.

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I therefore became intrigued by the question, “How can people who share the same values end up poles apart in how they implement them?” This line of curiosity eventually led me to what I now call the VBP molecule. I’ll explain what each of those letters means in a moment.

As I said in my introduction, the VBP molecule is not a chemical or physical structure, such as a hydrocarbon molecule. It’s a mental structure consisting of elements drawn from both the affective side and the cognitive side of our inner being.

But so far as I can tell, we have no psychological term for the reality which I’m about to describe. Thus, to explain it to clients, I needed a distinctive name for it. And one day, as I was sketching a diagram of the structure, I realized that my graphic resembled a molecule. That’s where the name came from. And “VBP” in the name represents the elements which make up the molecule.

The V stands for Value. Every VBP molecule forms around a value. Because we have dozens of values, we have dozens of VBP molecules, each unique to a given value. I therefore have a VBP molecule for honesty. Another for loyalty. Another for compassion. And so forth.

In your mind’s eye, draw a circle and put the word “Value” in it. At this point we’re not going to talk about a specific value. The word “Value” is merely a placeholder for whatever value you may want to put in that circle later on.

Values are at the heart of our motivation. That is to say, none of us is motivated to do something which has no value for us. Before we proceed, however, I need to clarify how I’m using the word “value.” What we typically refer to as values are things which we strive to attain. Desirable things like success. Wealth. Achievement. Long life. Loving relationships.

But just as we are motivated by what we strive to attain, we are also motivated by what we strive to avoid. Failure would fall in this category, along with such things as embarrassment, poverty, powerlessness, disease, just to name a few. In a sense, these are values, too. Marketers play off of them as values when they highlight all the misfortune which awaits you if you do not use the product which they are promoting.

I refer to that first group of values – the things which we desire – as attainment values. They are what we strive to attain. This second group I call “avoidance values.” They are things which I strive to avoid.

In the VBP molecule, the value at the heart of the molecule can be either an attainment value or an avoidance value. Of course, both types of values sometimes work in tandem to reinforce one another. For example, striving to attain success works collaboratively with striving to avoid failure. In pairings like this, however, one of the two VBP molecules will be stronger, usually notably stronger. In one person, the drive to succeed may overshadow the drive to avoid failure. For the next person, the drive to avoid failure may be highly dominant.

This is a significant distinction. The behavior pattern of people driven to succeed is different from the behavior which we see in people whose primary drive is to avoid failure. But this contrast has a profound influence on how executives and entrepreneurs – and all workers, for that matter – approach challenging tasks. Striving for success attunes us to opportunities and stokes courage and bold initiatives. Striving to avoid failure attunes us to dangers and promotes timidity and caution.

Of course, there's much more to be said about that contrast. For the moment, however, our priority is to sketch the architecture of the VBP molecule. We have a circle labeled "Value" clearly established. Now envision some smaller circles situated around the circumference of that circle. They are bound to the value in much the way that elements are bound together by valence structures within a chemical molecule.

Picture the word "Belief" in each of these circles. The B in VBP stands for "Belief." Every value is closely linked to a series of beliefs which we hold regarding the value. Why is it important to us? Why do we rank it as we do in comparison to other values? What benefit derives from the value? What happens in the absence of this value? Beliefs are our answers to questions such as these.

In sketching the VBP molecule, I've learned that it's important to explain the difference between values and beliefs. People don't always make that distinction. Yet, it's important for understanding the VBP molecule.

First, values and beliefs come from two different parts of our inner being. Values reside in what is called the affective domain. Emotions are part of that domain. So, too, are impulses. Tastes. Longings. Aspirations. Those things which arise from the affective domain are subjective by nature, not objective. They constitute the non-rational side of our existence, because the rules of rationality do not apply to them. And they elude efforts to quantify them precisely.

Beliefs, on the other hand, reside in the cognitive domain, and the rules of rationality apply everywhere in the cognitive domain. Unlike values, beliefs can be dissected logically. Internal contradictions in them can be identified. Their conformity with reality can be tested.

Grammatically speaking, there is also another distinction between values and beliefs. Values can be stated in a single word, or at most a very brief phrase such as "peace of mind" or "spirit of unity." Values don't require a clause or a sentence to explain them.

By contrast, beliefs must be expressed as complete statements. One of my current clients identifies "transparency" as a corporate value. If I ask, "Why transparency?" they must answer in a sentence, perhaps even several sentences. These statements encapsulate their beliefs about transparency. Collectively these beliefs constitute their rationale for giving such prominence to transparency.

Every value we have – whether its an attainment value or an avoidance value – is coupled to a set of beliefs. Another way to say this is: you don't possess a single value about which you have no beliefs.

Now, let me take us on a little side trip into my own beliefs about beliefs. Certain values, I believe, are innate to human nature. They arise naturally in all human beings.

Several years ago I contributed a chapter to a book called *Bushido Business*, which looked at leadership in modern corporate life through the lens of the bushido code of ethics from the heyday of Japanese samurai warriors.

In my chapter, I pointed out that the virtues of the bushido code are universal. The code embraced such things as being morally upright, courage, benevolence, respect, honesty, and honor. Every society in every age has seen these traits as desirable. Or to word it another way, no society has deemed it wise to outlaw such things as moral behavior, kindness, and respect.

These values seem almost inborn. We may have to learn to practice them, but we do not have to learn to admire them.

On the other hand, every belief is learned. I may innately see courage as desirable. My beliefs about courage, however, are the product of lessons which I've drawn from life. The solution to motivation problems is not to change people's values. It is to change what they believe about these values. If values are truly innate – and there's strong anecdotal evidence that they are – they are no more subject to change than physical attributes which are innate to us. But beliefs about our values can be changed, and the result will be evident in changed behavior.

This behavioral change results from the third element of our VBP molecules. Return to your visual of a circle labeled with "Value" surrounded by other circles labeled "Belief." Next, imagine that one of the Belief circles has some lines extending from the circumference outward to nearby circles with a "P" in them. The P in the VBP stands for Principle. Beliefs in the VBP molecule give rise to a set of principles which state how the core value and our beliefs about it should be implemented.

Returning to our earlier example, if one of our corporate values is transparency, our beliefs about transparency then become the basis on which we articulate the principles that will govern our practice of transparency in the organization.

When I referred to those warring partners earlier in the podcast, they were agreed on their corporate values. But their beliefs about those values were not always congruent. And as a result, their principles for implementing those values were at times incompatible.

I see this pattern repeatedly in all types of human interactions. Not just in corporate life, but in family life, in political life, in church life. People who apparently share the same value, but are totally at odds on how to apply it. For parents, it may be on instilling accountability in their children. For political parties it may be whether to pursue incremental victories or sweeping victories. For companies it may be whether to remain independent or become part of a conglomerate. The examples are endless.

When you and I disagree on principles, whatever the arena of life, the knee-jerk reaction is for me to conclude that you and I don't share the same values. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the VBP molecule, that analysis is normally too superficial. More than likely the source of difference is found in what we believe about the value and the principles which we have derived from these beliefs.

And because both beliefs and principles reside in the cognitive domain, we can carry on rational dialogue about them and seek a meeting of the minds. Ultimately, neither of us can persuade the other to change values. But we can persuade one another to change our beliefs about certain values or about the principles which we draw from these beliefs.

In the process, what a person believes about a value may change enough that he or she may no longer hold the value in the same esteem. With that shift in thinking, the person may be willing to move the aside and elevate another to take its place. The result is not a change in the value but an exchange of values.

As a group, once we gain conformity in our critical VBP molecules, we can then develop harmonious priorities, plans, and processes to move our joint effort forward. When I asked you to put a P in that third ring of circles, it was because "principle" is a long word and might not

easily fit into the way that you had envisioned the circles. Beyond that, the P can be thought of as standing for the priority, plans, and processes which become aligned once we build common accord around the principles.

Needless to say, there are tons of implications which flow from my observations today. In the interest of time, I'll resist the temptation to delve into some of them. Let me conclude, however, by making two suggestions.

First, while I've had you drawing mental pictures of the VBP molecule, let me offer you a downloadable file containing an illustration of it. It's available on my podcast website. Go to [upsizeyourleadership.com/episodes](https://upsizeyourleadership.com/episodes). In the index of programs, find the one entitled "The Molecule That Runs Your Life." Click on that episode and find a downloadable version of the graphic on that page.

Second, take some time to work through two or three of the key VBP molecules which are most important for you, whether in your personal life or professional life. It will take some time and some reflection. But it's extremely worthwhile. Most of us have never really thought through our beliefs about our most critical values. Nor have we extended that analysis to see what principles are implicit in our beliefs. I could tell you dozens of stories of clients who have transformed their lives or salvaged their careers because they changed one pivotal belief in a VBP molecule. By mapping some of your own VBP molecules, there's no telling what you will discover about yourself.

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