

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VIRTUES IN BUILDING A VALUES-DRIVEN WORKPLACE CULTURE:

Insights from Apax

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apax





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Introduction

Britain is ready to have a meaningful conversation on the role and nature of work. The question of how workplaces can contribute to the flourishing of individuals and communities is a subject of increasing importance in an interconnected and rapidly changing world. Creating workplaces which do not dichotomise individual and collective well-being and work and families/communities is a worthwhile endeavour because it contributes to well-being both individually and collectively and can tangibly increase the outcomes of the organisation or company (Rao¹ and Indla, 2010). Seeing one's work as being governed by the same values and principles as one's personal life and conduct can help to overcome this false dichotomisation.

The UK Baha'i Office of Public Affairs (OPA) has embarked on a project looking at perspectives around how socio-economic equality affects social cohesion. Due to its mandate in representing the British Baha'i community in its relations with government, civil society and the media with the purpose of bringing about a peaceful and more unified society, the Office recognised the challenge an unequal socio-economic system poses to social cohesion. The workplace is the smallest collective unit of economic order, it serves as the foundation of a healthy socio-economic system and that is why the Office has chosen to focus this report on the workplace.

Throughout the Baha'i writings, work is described as a praiseworthy element of life and society. It is an integral aspect of people's individual and collective lives which brings about order and stability. Work, as any part of human society, is governed by certain principles and values.

Recognizing this, Apax had separately embarked on a decade-long journey of institutional transformation, striving to create a culture that reflects these values of harmony, cohesion and promotes meaningful contributions to society. As an organisation, it has found that universal human values such as kindness, truthfulness, and unity, when applied genuinely and thoughtfully, in both its internal and outward-facing operations has created a truly positive workplace culture.

Apax draws inspiration from diverse fields of knowledge, including philosophy, spirituality, and business management. Central to the organisation is a commitment to cultivating a values-driven enterprise, where coherence between thought, word, and action becomes the hallmark of organisational life. Insights from traditions such as *Ikigai* (the Japanese philosophy of purpose), *Kaizen* (continuous improvement), and *Wabi-sabi* (finding beauty in imperfection) blend harmoniously with the principles of unity, justice, and service similar to the teachings of the Baha'i Faith.

The Office of Public Affairs, identifying an opportunity to explore new and creative ideas and practices aimed at creating more meaningful workplaces, reached out to Apax to collaborate on this project.

This study represents an effort to understand how the application of virtues can transform relationships within the workplace, strengthen the bonds of community, and advance a shared vision of progress. Specifically, it seeks to understand how Apax's value-based approach impacts individual staff experiences, team dynamics, and client engagement.

In this paper, three main principles will be outlined to this end: work as a service to society, work as a space to strive for excellence and work as an arena for the expressions of universal human values. The report will explain the methodology employed in the study and highlight emergent insights and themes and end with a conclusion and thoughts about how to move forward.

¹ Rao, T. S., & Indla, V. (2010). Work, family or personal life: Why not all three?. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 52(4), 295-297.

Apax: A brief history

Apax is a multi award-winning values-driven, non-profit, social enterprise. It provides assisted living and supported housing services for vulnerable adults who have experienced social exclusion and disadvantages, mental health, or homelessness. Apax actively collaborates with its partners aiming to create meaningful social impact, supporting residents toward independent living and social cohesion.

In recent years, Apax has undertaken various initiatives, including a complete digital transformation, the introduction of VR Wellness programs for residents, and the integration of the Virtues Project International into its organizational framework.

The Virtues Project International is a global initiative that empowers individuals and organizations to cultivate excellence of character, resilience, and a shared sense of purpose through the practice of virtues. Rooted in universal human values, the project provides practical strategies for fostering positive relationships, ethical leadership, and a culture of mutual respect and empowerment.

Apax was first introduced to the Virtues Project in 2017, through the interest of a few staff members who brought this to the organisation. They made up the first cohort of facilitators and began to embed the virtues in their work with residents. From there, the principles of the Virtues Project were gradually integrated into the organization's culture, shaping interactions among staff and residents alike. This is an example of principles which Apax has shown historic strength; trust in their staff to follow their instincts and interests for the betterment of the organisation and new ideas being met with enthusiasm and encouragement.

Building on this foundation, Apax has since made virtues training a core part of its onboarding process, ensuring that every new team member is introduced to its principles. The virtues are now used as part of team and departmental reflections, company reflection meetings (CRMs), performance management and learning and development programs.

Methodology

The research involved qualitative engagement with both staff and clients, enabling insights to emerge from the lived experience of those immersed in the organisational culture.

Twenty interviews with as many staff were conducted with members from across the organisation, including administrative personnel, finance teams, and recovery coordinators (support workers) and 16 residents. These individual conversations, lasting approximately 30 minutes, were complemented by group consultations with residents. Together, these interactions explored themes of purpose, identity, unity, fostering strong relationships, creating a cohesive organizational environment and the role of virtues underlying all of these concepts.

The guiding questions focused on five main areas:

1. Individual Level: Purpose, Identity, and Meaning in Work For staff:

- Can you describe if/ how working at Apax has contributed to your sense of purpose and identity?
- Do/how do you see your role contributing to both your development and the development of the organisation and clients?

2. Team Dynamics and Organisational Culture:

- How do you and your colleagues work to overcome common negative forces like office gossip, competition, or backbiting, and to replace them with collaboration and unity? What challenges have emerged? What has proven effective/what the learning has been from the process of overcoming these challenges?
- To what extent do you and others feel a sense of ownership over this process of creating a more positive work culture? How has that been encouraged?
- How do company reflection meetings (CRM) work and what do they contribute to the overall operation of the company? How are goals set and achieved? Have/how have you seen this be helpful in fostering a sense of unity of vision and action?

3. For Senior Managers:

- What role does a senior leader have in reinforcing the culture?
- What qualities and attitudes help you in managing a team? What has the learning been from this?
- How has building unity within your team and between teams been attempted? What has proved effective?
- Over the years at Apax what have you seen change? Where has transformation occurred? What do you attribute this to?

4. **Working with Residents:**

- How does the virtues-based training prepare you for engaging with clients? What aspects of the training/what concepts do you draw in with your work?
- Have you noticed any shifts in how clients respond to your service as a result of the focus on virtues and human potential?

5. **For Residents themselves:**

- What has made the greatest impact on you since you have moved to Apax services?
- What does Apax do differently from other services you have experienced?
- Have you noticed anything about the culture of Apax that you like? What do you appreciate about the values-driven culture that Apax is striving to create?

This methodology, emphasising dialogue and mutual learning, sought not only to identify insights but also to strengthen bonds of trust and collaboration among participants, especially within the client focus groups.

Emergent Insights and Themes

The Role of Virtues in Motivation and Meaningful Work

“Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world’s material resources.”²

The virtues framework has enabled individuals to articulate and embody principles that, though often latent, had previously gone unrecognised. Staff have shared how this approach provides them with a vocabulary and framework to explore and practice values such as moderation, kindness, and patience, enhancing both their personal and professional lives. By consistently applying these virtues, they find their own motivation replenished, fostering a deeper sense of purpose in their work.

This sense of purpose aligns with Apax’s overarching vision—to strive for excellence both within the organisation and in the service it provides to the community. Many staff members expressed that this vision was a key factor in their decision to join and remain at Apax. They were drawn to the organisation’s commitment to social progress and the opportunity to contribute to meaningful change. As one participant explained,

“One of the main reasons for me coming to Apax was because I wanted to do something a little more impactful... I wanted to do something that wasn’t solely driven by money.”

For many, work was not just a means of earning a living but also a vehicle for personal fulfillment and social transformation. Participants described their attitudes towards work shifting from being motivated primarily by financial incentives to seeking work that aligns with their values. Another staff member shared,

“Apax has given me the opportunity to help those that need our help, and it’s fulfilling.”

This desire to act on deeply held principles was further reinforced by the tangible impact staff observed in their daily work. Seeing virtues translated into concrete actions—both in their interactions with clients and in the relationships between staff themselves—made their commitment feel real and meaningful. One participant reflected on this connection between ideals and action:

“What encapsulated my interest was more around how we translate these principles into our daily actions for the betterment of the world and for the betterment of others. Being in that servitude arena—of every day trying to improve the world by improving myself and also others—was a way to bring philosophical thinking into a business setting.”

The workplace became more than just a professional environment, it became a space where their personal and professional identities could align. By practicing virtues in their interactions with colleagues and residents, staff found greater coherence between their inner values and outward actions.

Moreover, the use of virtues was especially significant in supporting the emotionally demanding work undertaken by recovery coordinators. One participant, half-jokingly remarked,

“For us to do the job that we do, we [need to] uphold a lot of virtues.”

This statement underscores how the virtues framework is not just a theoretical concept but a necessary foundation for navigating the challenges of their roles. Ultimately, the integration of virtues into the workplace fosters a culture where motivation is sustained, personal growth is encouraged, and work becomes a means of service rather than mere employment.

Creating an Environment that Enables Transformation

“We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.”³

The recognition that everyone is capable of manifesting virtues has led to the inexorable conclusion that everyone should be enabled to manifest these qualities through training and education within an encouraging environment with built-in spaces for reflection.

³ Shoghi Effendi (17 February 1933)

Virtues and Unity Training programs are another important aspect of creating an environment of learning. They equip staff with the tools to practice virtues in their interactions and decision-making, fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. By drawing on principles such as truthfulness, patience, and humility, individuals develop the capacity to navigate challenges with integrity while strengthening unity within the organization. This ongoing process of learning is deeply embedded in daily conversations, as reflected in staff reflections: “We are forever learning,” “speaking the language of the virtues,” and “building unity has always been a topic that is organically woven and embedded into our daily conversation.” Through these programs, virtues become more than abstract ideals—they become practical guides that shape both personal and professional growth.

Reflection is integral to this process because it not only reinforces learning but also provides individuals with the opportunity to be curious, ask questions and align their actions with their values, fostering both personal and collective growth.

At the organisational level, the virtues framework has become a unifying force, bringing coherence and alignment to thought, vision, and action. This shared foundation has strengthened teamwork, enabling a balance between creativity, focus, and effectiveness. Central to Apax’s approach is the principle of a “humble posture of learning,” in which both staff and residents learn together through continuous reflection on experience. Successes are not viewed as individual accomplishments but as collective victories, while mistakes are embraced as opportunities for growth.

To sustain this culture of learning, mechanisms for realignment and reflection are essential. Apax has implemented Company Reflection Meetings (CRMs), held every three months, where teams and departments share insights, challenges, and successes. These meetings serve as a platform for disseminating knowledge across the organization, workshoping new ideas, and collectively refining approaches. A staff member highlighted the value of these gatherings:

“We put a lot of effort into getting the entire company together to reflect... And I think that is very helpful in terms of building culture and having that sense of unity and collective purpose.”

Regular reflection within and between teams also plays a crucial role in fostering a non-judgmental, supportive environment where all individuals can thrive. By addressing challenges openly and constructively, these practices replace negative forces such as gossip or competition with trust and collaboration. Staff members described this culture of reflection as:

“Reflective practice as a daily, ongoing conversation.”

“So many layers of opportunities for people to share how they feel.”

Beyond formal reflection meetings, company-wide activities also play a key role in reinforcing cohesion and strengthening relationships. These initiatives ensure that, even when staff work from different offices, a strong sense of connection remains. One staff member shared:

“The different company-wide activities that we do really help to foster cohesion and build relationships. Even though we all work from different offices and aren’t always in the same place, we still have really good relationships because of these efforts to bring everyone together.”

By embedding reflection and shared learning into its culture, Apax cultivates an environment of continuous growth—where individuals, teams, and the organisation as a whole evolve together.

Spirit of unity and equality

“The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity... the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity.”⁴

A spirit of equality and unity that comes from a shared purpose permeates Apax, fostering an environment where every individual feels valued and empowered to contribute. While there is clear leadership within teams and designated points of contact for practical and emotional support, the traditional notions of workplace hierarchy and power have been replaced by a culture of mutual effort, consultation, and collaboration. Open-door policies and structures that encourage shared ownership have helped lower barriers between staff at different levels, creating a workplace where everyone feels valued and a deep sense of belonging, regardless of their role. As one participant expressed, “In Apax, unity stems from each person feeling a part of the whole.”

Building unity is an ongoing and intentional process, grounded in trusting relationships and a shared vision. Staff frequently engage in discussions and reflections on unity, recognising that strong communication is essential to fostering trust and collaboration. As one staff member emphasised, “Good communication is key.” Effective communication not only strengthens workplace relationships but also reinforces the foundation of trust, which another participant described as “the fundamental currency.” This culture of openness and connection extends across departments, enhancing the process of mutual support and enabling staff to better serve clients.

A strong sense of shared purpose is also cultivated through meaningful relationships. Staff members recognise the importance of knowing their colleagues personally, as it allows them to be more attuned to each other’s well-being. “I do believe that you should know your team personally... so that you can pick up things when you know something’s not right,” one participant noted. This attentiveness strengthens team dynamics and ensures that individuals feel supported both professionally and personally.

4 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (The Promulgation of Universal Peace)

Furthermore, the alignment of values among staff contributes to an environment where unity is not just an abstract ideal but a lived reality. As another participant shared, “We have really great people that share the same values and want to provide that environment and culture as well.”

Ultimately, Apax’s commitment to unity and collaboration ensures that every department and individual sees themselves as part of a greater whole. Through clear and open communication, mutual trust, and a shared commitment to the organisation and its aims, staff help to create a workplace characterised by unity, openness and a sense of belonging.

Coherence between Words and Deeds

“Whether through deeds or words, the merit of your every contribution to social well-being lies, first, in your resolute commitment to discover that precious point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce.”⁵

Many staff members observed that when virtues guide decision-making and action, a natural coherence emerges between words and deeds. This alignment has strengthened trust within the organisation, inspiring and motivating staff. Apax is more than just a workplace—it functions as a community where people leave better than when they arrived, shaped by the values they practice daily. The organisation’s deep-rooted connection to its surrounding community in Lewisham further reinforces this coherence, ensuring that its principles are not just internal ideals but lived realities that extend beyond its walls.

One staff member reflected on this sense of purpose, sharing, “It was quite motivating for me to do something where the money was being reinvested in the staff, in the residents, and in the local community—just to better society, to do something better.” This sentiment captures the essence of Apax’s mission: to serve not just its clients but the broader community, reinforcing a shared commitment to social progress.

Clarity of purpose is another defining characteristic of Apax. Staff members are united in their understanding of the organisation’s goals, making effective communication essential in achieving them. Every effort is directed toward supporting residents in their recovery. As one participant explained, “Our strategic goals are very often, if not all the time, about how we can serve the residents and how we can get more people on board in terms of the resident base to help them. It’s not about getting loads of residents to make more money, but to help them recover from whatever mental health diagnosis they have.”

Beyond its impact on professional life, the virtues framework also shapes individuals on a personal level. By integrating virtues into daily interactions, staff members experience personal growth alongside their professional responsibilities. The values they practice at work, such as patience, humility, and truthfulness, extend into their lives outside of Apax, influencing how they engage with their families, friends, and communities. This holistic transformation underscores the power of a virtues-based culture, where both individuals and the collective thrive together.

An anecdote that captures this sentiment from one of the staff was about how she came to work one day feeling very frustrated by a personal matter. Upon entering the workplace, opening up her laptop and seeing her folder titled “Virtues@Work,” which all the staff have on their internal platform, Workplace, she clicked on it for some guidance. At this point, she was not as familiar with the virtues as she was still new to Apax but she recognised their importance and instinctively turned to them to help. Reading through, she stumbled on one called “detachment,” which described the process of experiencing feelings without letting them control you and caring about the outcome of something without letting it ruin your day if the ultimate outcome was not the one you wanted. This really struck a chord within her and she carried it throughout the whole day, even taking it back home to her children. She said that she now uses these virtue cards at home to resolve challenges and build unity.

Another anecdote came from a staff member who said the moment he knew he would stay working at Apax for a long time came out of a moment of crisis. It was during a meeting where the organisation had decided to pursue a potentially challenging new policy and when this was raised to someone high up in the company structure, they replied by saying that any stakeholder who had questions or was in doubt about this new policy could come to them. Witnessing this “act of integrity” as the staff member phrased it was truly inspiring because that was the moment they knew that at Apax, your words and your deeds carry equal weight and that people throughout the company from the top to the bottom would strive daily to uphold these virtues.

Intentionality in Applying the Virtues

“First, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds.”⁶

At Apax, the hiring process is a direct reflection of its commitment to integrating virtues such as kindness, compassion, and generosity into every aspect of the organisation. Rather than focusing solely on technical skills, the interview process places significant emphasis on personal motivation, values, and aspirations. If an applicant reaches the interview stage, it is understood that they already possess the necessary qualifications for the role, what matters just as much, if not more, is their alignment with Apax’s vision and principles. This intentional approach ensures that new staff members not only bring expertise but also embody the virtues that define the organisation’s culture.

This values-based hiring process demonstrates the deliberate effort Apax makes to weave virtues into its operations, from recruitment to daily workplace interactions. One participant noted that “the environment was friendly” and appreciated the long interview format, which allowed them “a chance to show what kind of person I am, and at the same time... I get to see what kind of company this is.” This mutual evaluation process is part of Apax’s broader commitment to fostering a workplace where shared values create a strong sense of purpose and unity.

Staff members also described this hiring approach as refreshing, particularly when compared to their previous experiences in workplaces that prioritized profit, background, or technical expertise over personal values. At Apax, the belief that excellence in skills and capacities is cultivated within the workplace itself is central to its ethos. By prioritising character and attitude, the organization attracts individuals who are not only skilled but also passionate about contributing to a culture of service and collaboration.

⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá)

As one staff member expressed that because of the culture interview, they felt “more informed of what is happening here and what is expected of me.” This careful and intentional approach to recruitment is a key part of Apax’s larger mission to integrate virtues at every level, ensuring that the organisation remains a space where both staff and clients can grow and thrive.

Accompaniment: Learning is an Empowering, Shared Pursuit

“Labour[ing] together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others.”⁷

For Apax, the virtue of excellence is reflected in the smooth functioning of its internal processes, ensuring that administrative and operational systems effectively support residents in their recovery journeys. Excellence is not seen as a fixed standard but as an ongoing process of action, reflection, and refinement—continuously enhancing the quality of service provided. This dynamic approach fosters transformation among both staff and residents, strengthening their capacities and reinforcing the collective processes that guide the organisation’s operations.

A key insight that the virtues framework has provided is a redefinition of excellence—not reserved for management, but as a shared aspiration across all levels of the organisation. The framework highlights the importance of universal participation, recognising that every individual has a praiseworthy desire to excel in their role, regardless of their position. This sense of shared ownership is deeply embedded within the culture of Apax. Everyone, from managers and recovery coordinators to finance staff, and at times even the clients themselves, feels a stake in the organisation’s integral processes.

The virtues-based culture also fosters agency and creativity among staff, allowing them to express their unique talents in ways that benefit the wider community. Initiatives such as resident-led cooking groups, where residents choose a meal, cook with staff support, and share it as a community, illustrate this collaborative spirit. Other initiatives, such as the Boxercise program—where a staff member facilitates boxing exercises with residents—and the running group, where staff run together weekly, reinforce the idea that personal well-being and community well-being are deeply interconnected. The 5K Mental Health Marathon, organized by staff to raise funds for Mental Health Awareness Week, further demonstrates the freedom and trust given to individuals to contribute meaningfully to the collective well-being.

At the core of Apax’s philosophy is the belief that individual growth is inseparably linked with the development of the whole. As individuals cultivate their talents, capacities, and virtues in service of the community, both they and the collective benefit. For this vision to be fully realized, a process of accompaniment is essential, where those with more experience guide and learn alongside those who are still developing a particular skill. This mutual learning process empowers both parties, reinforcing the idea that growth is not a solitary pursuit but a shared journey.

Creating a Sense of Shared Ownership

“This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their... development.”⁸

Recovery coordinators, in particular, emphasised how the virtues framework enables them to see residents not as passive recipients of services, but as unique individuals with inherent capacities and potential. This shift in perspective fosters relationships built on mutual respect and empowerment, which in turn supports the healing process. One of the most profound transformations in thought moderated by virtues training has been the transition from viewing clients as fragile, passive recipients of services to recognising them as active protagonists in their own lives. As individuals with talents, aspirations, and valuable contributions to make. This holistic approach to recovery encourages both personal growth and a collective learning experience.

In practice, this philosophy is embodied in resident engagement initiatives that blend skill-building with meaningful participation. Residents are encouraged to take part in activities that align with their interests while also developing interpersonal and critical thinking skills. Moreover, they are given opportunities to design and lead their own activities, drawing from their personal experiences and expertise and building strong bonds of friendship through learning together. This growing sense of ownership is reflected in one staff member’s observation:

“You’re building your skills, so at the end of the day, you’re not just participating in an activity—you’re also learning from it.”

At Apax, residents are not just recipients of support—they are active contributors to their own recovery and the community around them. Through resident-led activities, individuals take ownership of their environment by organizing and participating in meaningful initiatives that align with their interests and skills. These activities create a sense of agency, reinforcing the idea that each person has something valuable to offer. One participant highlighted the impact of this approach, sharing, “There is a stronger unity I feel because of the activities.” By engaging in shared experiences, residents not only build relationships with one another but also develop confidence and a sense of belonging, which are essential elements in their journey toward recovery.

Another way in which Apax integrates resident voices into its organizational culture is through Quality Circles—collaborative spaces where residents and staff work together to uphold shared standards and improve the overall experience of care. These forums cultivate mutual accountability and respect, empowering residents to express their perspectives, offer feedback, and contribute to shaping the services that support them. One staff member emphasized the significance of this initiative, stating, “What they’re doing for the residents, like the quality circle, I think it’s an amazing idea... They have quite a good turnout... It’s empowerment, the residents are feeling heard... it’s giving them that space.” By ensuring that residents are not only listened to but also actively involved in decision-making, Apax strengthens trust and collaboration, reinforcing its commitment to dignity, inclusion, and shared progress.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

The findings of this study illustrate the transformative potential of a values-driven approach to organisational culture. By centering virtues such as unity, truthfulness, and kindness, Apax has created an environment where individuals can discover their purpose, align their actions with their values, and contribute to the collective good.

This report highlights the potential for virtues to be used in the implementation and creation of workplaces that are on a continual path of training, action, reflection, and refining action based on learning. It is trying to see all as protagonists of their own progress and the collective progress of Apax, through encouraging new ideas and initiatives from staff and residents alike. It sees itself as part of a community and takes its role in the service to that community seriously. People who interact with Apax affirm that it tries to see the nobility in all people and they can see the effort which has gone into developing certain spaces and processes which are as inclusive and welcoming as possible. The levels of coherence between words and deeds, internal and outward-facing processes and between staff and residents is ever-deepening.²

This is a clear case study of an organisation which is striving to be governed by three basic principles: work as a service to society, work as a space to strive for excellence and work as an arena for the expressions of universal human values. While Apax would not claim to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Challenges, mistakes and stumbling blocks are potential learning opportunities which can strengthen the values-driven ethos of any organisation. This humble process of learning forms the cornerstones of Apax's identity.

In moving forward, the organisation would like to begin integrating its virtues training with residents, to train them in becoming facilitators of the virtues project themselves, further empowering them and enabling them to take more central roles in their and others' healing journeys.

This journey is ongoing, marked by a spirit of humility and reflection. Yet the experiences at Apax demonstrate that workplaces guided by spiritual principles can serve as powerful spaces for individual and societal transformation, fostering hope and enabling all participants to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of their communities.

