

The Blended Value Glossary

An effort to create a common language in the blended value universe

“ The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right name. ”
A Chinese Proverb

The opening salvo

Words matter. They can inspire and they can wound. They are the foundation on which meaning is communicated and understanding is forged.

We begin with the simple belief that the words we use are of great consequence. That language has power. That striving for a common lexicon among the participants of the blended value universe—those mountaineers climbing the peaks of social enterprise, corporate citizenship, socially responsible investing, strategic philanthropy, and sustainable development—is not only a worthwhile endeavor, but also a necessary one.

The profound revolution in thought and practice that is unfolding around the globe is occurring beneath the shadow of a genuine Tower of Babel. One person's social enterprise is another person's social-purpose business venture; one person's investment is another person's grant. Who do we identify as a social entrepreneur? How do we know a sustainable practice when we see one? Is the revolution best characterized as an interdisciplinary movement or the birth of a new sector? And if it is a sector, what should it be called?

Consider that last question again. If we can't even name the sector in which we work and the movement of which we are a part, how can we expect others to understand us, to join us, and to invest in us?

The absence of a common language impedes our work, divides one group from another, and marginalizes the efforts of the whole from effectively communicating its passion and practice to the mainstream. The result is not only inefficiency and illegitimacy for ourselves, but injury to the people and issues that we serve.

The BVG

The blended value glossary (the BVG) is intended to advance a single, comprehensive nomenclature so that our common language can be a source of power instead of perplexity. The BVG will strive for convergence, streamlining the lexicon so that single concepts are connected to single terms (and vice versa). The BVG will strive for precision, clarifying subtle distinctions among concepts and terms. But when convergence and precision are not possible, the BVG will simply present how a term is used within a variety of contexts.

The result, we hope, will be not only a singular, definitive resource, but also an opportunity for collaboration among the “silos” within the blended value universe and for the participants to strive for a more collective identity.

The BVG will necessarily build on the work of countless others—organizations that have defined terms in a particular field, such as socially responsible investing, as well as the handful of organizations that have already undertaken efforts to define emerging terms.

Locked in the cross hairs of the BVG are the 50 or so words that most obstruct our cooperation, encumber our communications, and result in the more inane conversations among us.

Ultimately, the BVG will only be as useful as it is used. Without widespread endorsement and adoption, the BVG, we fear, will be just another footnote or, worse, just another source of confusion.

However, we have reason for optimism. Many other fields have wrestled with these linguistic challenges and come out on top. For example, the legal profession has Black's Law Dictionary, and the psychiatric community has the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Each of these examples also reminds us that the work of creating a common language is an ongoing process—the aforementioned books are in their seventh and fourth editions, respectively. Moreover, the Internet can be leveraged to accelerate the traditional process of aggregating terminology and disseminating common usage.

But what gives us the most hope is that the peaks we climb are part of a common range. At the core, our work is the same—creating organizations and markets capable of maximizing a more complete meaning of value, one that encompasses our economic, social, and environmental impact.

Happy linguistic hunting!

Prepared by Tim O'Hara
for the Blended Value Glossary Team
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Mountain metaphor, Babel imagery, and many choice terms and phrases were "borrowed" mercilessly from Jed Emerson's Blended Value Map. The phrases "words matter" and "language has power" were oft-repeated by David Bradley, founder of the Advisory Board Company, where I was employed for many years. This manifesto also benefited directly from conversations with Elizabeth Bibb and notes from Maria Wu. And, of course, it reflects the communal thoughts of all those souls who trekked to Colorado in early February 2004 and the beer purchased by Jed Emerson himself.