

Ava Health's Manifesto

Part 2: The Values



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The Ava Health Manifesto, Part 2: The Values

What Happens When Values Stop Being Buzzwords and Start Running the Company

Published August 6th, 2025, by Christopher Bennett, Chief Executive Officer and co-Founder

“Values aren’t posters on a wall. They’re practices that protect people — or destroy them when ignored.”

The single greatest asset of Ava Health — today, tomorrow, next year, forever — is our people. Full stop. Not our model. Not our property portfolio. Not our systems, software, or strategy. People. Human beings who carry this vision forward with relentless heart and a level of courage that can’t be bought, only cultivated. They are the soul of this organization. Everything else we build, our programs, our reputation, our outcomes, only exists because of the people who show up day in and day out to do the hard, unglamorous work. This isn’t a tagline. This is truth. If we ever forget it, we’ve already lost.

But let’s not confuse that truth with convenience — this work, and this industry, has been failing its people for decades. Let’s name the enemy: it’s the parking lot panic attacks before the shift. It’s the silent sobs from a nurse who can’t stomach another under-resourced trauma admission. It’s the leaders in corner offices sending out tone-deaf policy memos while never stepping foot onto the front lines. It’s the gross underpayment of staff who carry the emotional weight of broken systems. It’s the chronic burnout, the compassion fatigue, the therapists holding space for everyone but themselves. It’s the way passion gets extracted until there’s nothing left but hollow compliance.

It’s the trauma that staff absorb daily and then get gaslit when they name it. It’s the mission-drift that turns idealists into bureaucrats. And it’s the industry-wide complacency that pretends that’s just “part of the job.”

Let’s be crystal clear: **that is the enemy**. The dehumanization of helpers. The commodification of care. The betrayal of purpose. We’ve watched it destroy organizations. We’ve watched it destroy people. And we’ve made it our life’s work to build a place that stands in direct, daily defiance of all of it.

Most companies put their values on the wall and that’s the only place they exist. I’ve done this. I’ve been the guy who talks about culture but doesn’t live it. I’ve watched beautiful ideas collapse into chaos because the values sounded good but weren’t enforced, weren’t modeled, weren’t woven into the way people actually show up. And when values don’t live

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inside a company's bloodstream, what grows in their place is rot. It doesn't start with an explosion, it's a slow leak.

At first, it looks like stress. Then it turns into burnout. Eventually? It becomes resentment, distrust, silence. You walk into team meetings and feel the energy sucked out of the room. Nobody says what they really think. Good people leave. Teams feel it but can't name it. And the people who stay start to shut down. When that happens, the mission dies quietly, not because it was a bad idea, but because the culture couldn't hold it.

That's the cost of performative values. And I've paid that price.

Ten years ago, I helped build a company with a vision I truly loved. We brought a team together and co-created a set of values we believed in. But I didn't live them. I didn't model them. I let fear and ego get in the way. I micromanaged. I made decisions behind closed doors. I didn't empower the people I claimed to trust. And what happened next was predictable but heartbreak. The culture fractured. Trust eroded. Talented, heart-driven people left. I had to leave the company to save it from total collapse. And eventually, the vision that had once lit us up from the inside, died.

I'll carry that forever. Not with shame (anymore — took a lot of work), but with reverence. Because it taught me what values actually are. They're not words. They're practices. And when we betray them, even once, it ripples through every single corner of an organization. That's why this Manifesto exists. Because we are not doing that again.

So we decided to build Ava Health differently. No laminated values, no vague words that sound like they came from a leadership retreat. Only what we can live. Only what we will enforce. Only what we will allow to shape who we hire, who we fire, and how we move.

In Part 1 of the Manifesto, we shared our vision:

To live in a world where adaptable, accountable, and accessible behavioral healthcare is a universal right.

That vision means nothing if we don't have values strong enough to carry it. And that's what Part 2 is about.

Let me be honest: this wasn't just a branding exercise for us. This was a survival mechanism. Because we knew if we didn't get our culture right, everything we are building would burn.

When we sat down to define our values, we didn't start with what would look good on a poster. We started with the moments that nearly broke us. The teams that lost their way.

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The decisions that cost us trust. And the people who held us accountable when we forgot who we were.

We asked ourselves: “What would it look like if everyone on our team, every single person, was driven by the same set of principles?”

Not just when things were going well. But especially when they weren’t.

What emerged were three values. Simple, unshakable, and unforgettable.

These aren’t just words. They’re lived behaviors. They’re standards. They’re non-negotiable. And they’re how we protect the culture we’re building — because if we don’t protect it, no one else will.

1. Agency

Agency is the belief that everyone — clients, staff, community partners — has the right and the responsibility to lead their own life. That no one is coming to save us. That we have to move.

Agency doesn’t mean chaos or unchecked autonomy. It means ownership. It means you speak up when something doesn’t sit right. It means you lead from wherever you are. It means you take responsibility not just for your role, but for the culture around you.

I’ve watched what happens when agency is stripped away — when staff members feel like cogs in a machine, when clients are told what their recovery “should” look like, when leadership hoards decision-making power in the name of control. The result is always the same: disengagement, stagnation, a loss of creativity and courage.

Agency changes that. It invites people back into the process. It turns clients into collaborators. It turns staff into leaders. It creates a culture where ideas are shared, action is taken, and people feel proud of what they build — because they helped build it.

And when agency is in place? You see it in the smallest moments. A nurse who redesigns a workflow that saves hours a week. A tech who speaks up when something feels off in group. A clinician who adjusts a care plan not because the policy says to, but because the client’s voice matters more than a checkbox.

Agency in community means refusing to play savior. It’s about showing up, listening first, and co-creating real solutions *with* people, not *for* them. It means seeing every neighborhood, every advocate, every overlooked voice as a partner, not a charity case. We don’t helicopter in with answers. We embed, we partner, we build trust one conversation at a time. When a community member says, “Here’s what we need,” we don’t debate, we

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respond. We put decision-making power back in the hands of the people living the reality. Because real agency isn't about what we *offer* — it's about what we *amplify*.

Agency is not optional. It's the heartbeat of Ava. And if you don't want to own your work, your words, your impact — you won't last here.

2. Service

Let's talk about service. Not the performative kind. The kind that leaves people speechless because of how deeply they were seen, heard, and valued.

When I was at my lowest, it wasn't a policy or a program that changed my life. It was someone who treated me like I mattered when I didn't believe I did. That's what service is. It's not just being helpful. It's radical and unreasonable hospitality. It's showing up when it's inconvenient. It's refusing to let someone fall through the cracks.

Service is the tone in your voice when you answer the phone. It's the way you talk about a client when they're not in the room. It's the extra chair you bring into the group room. The water bottle you hand to the guy shaking in detox. The way you clean up the kitchen without being asked.

It's giving a shit, every day, in every direction.

Service shows up when no one's watching. When you take the time to ask the second question — not "How are you?" but "How's your head and how's your heart?" It shows up in how you care for your teammates, your spaces, your systems. When you take the trash out because the trash is full. When you pick up the phone even when you're behind. When you stay late to make sure someone gets what they need. It's having a culture where you can buy the woman a cheeseburger who hasn't eaten today or having the budget to just solving a problem without having to ask thirteen people if it's okay.

And it's not just about effort, it's about intention. It's about knowing that people are walking through our doors in the worst moments of their lives and choosing to treat them not as problems to be solved but as people to be honored. Service in community means giving a damn when no one's watching. It's hosting town halls when it's inconvenient. It's showing up to community events even when it doesn't serve your bottom line. It's returning every call, every email, every outstretched hand, not because it's strategic, but because it's *human*. Service to community means you don't get to opt out when it's messy. You stand in the gap. You build the bridge. You bring the water when everyone else brings fire. Our success is measured in how our community speaks about us when we're not in the room.

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If you're here for a paycheck, you'll never understand what makes this place different. But if you're here to serve, really serve, you'll see the magic we can create.

3. Purpose

Purpose is why we keep going when everything gets hard.

This work will gut you. You will lose sleep. You will question yourself. You will face impossible decisions. And in those moments, when you're staring down uncertainty and wondering if it's worth it, purpose is what holds the line.

Purpose is our north star, our vision. It means we don't chase hype. We don't get distracted by shiny objects. We stay rooted in our mission: to create sustainable, world-class care for people who've been overlooked, dismissed, and written off.

Purpose is what allows us to say no to the noise. To focus on what matters. To keep building even when it's thankless, even when it's hard, even when no one is clapping. It's the internal compass that reminds us why we started this in the first place.

I don't care how talented you are. If you don't have purpose, you will quit. Or worse, you will stay and become bitter. And then you'll quit. But if you have purpose? You will find a way to push through. You will find a way to keep showing up. And you will find the meaning buried inside the mess. Our purpose as the leaders of Ava Health is to elevate each member of our Team to the next level of their professional career and their personal life. We don't abandon our people, we sit with, we coach, we support and we lead through intentional and integrity based practice. We lead from the trenches, not from some ivory tower.

Purpose in community means building beyond your own walls. It means asking yourself, "Are we leaving this place better than we found it?" It's not about programs. It's about impact. Are we creating economic opportunity? Are we reducing suffering? Are we building trust where it's been broken? Purpose shows up in the investments we make — in housing, in small business, in people. We don't just want to provide services; we want to shift systems. And we do it one meaningful, measurable outcome at a time. Because our purpose doesn't end when a client discharges, it only begins.

Purpose is the difference between giving up and getting back up.

And in this work, that difference is everything.

And here's where it all comes together: **we measure everything**. These aren't just aspirational values floating in the air — they're reflected in outcomes, in data, in the lived experiences of the people we serve and the people we work alongside.

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We'll measure our alignment with these values through client outcomes, staff and client satisfaction, retention rates, happiness scores, our financial sustainability, and even the buzz in the community. Our best recruiters will never be our ads — they'll be the people who have lived and breathed this work with us. Our top referral sources for both new clients and new employees? Not marketing funnels. Not social media. Our **current and former employees and clients** — the people who left this organization better than they found it, and left it with a full heart.

We celebrate every person who leaves Ava for the right reason. Not with bitterness. With pride. Because our job isn't to hoard talent or cling to control. Our job is to help people grow professionally, personally, spiritually. If someone leaves us because they've found the next right step for their life, their career, their calling, we celebrate the hell out of that. Because success for us isn't just about who stays. It's about who launches.

Our greatest asset isn't our buildings. It's not our branding. It's not even our care model. It's our people. And our commitment to them, every single day, is to make sure these values aren't just posters on a wall. They're the reason people stay. And the reason people leave better than they came.

Let me leave you with this:

This is bigger than Ava.

This is about rewriting the playbook for how behavioral healthcare is led, staffed, and lived. It's about building a future where people don't cry in their cars before clocking in. Where passion doesn't get punished. Where leaders are accessible, not untouchable. Where values aren't aspirational, they're operational.

This is about every therapist, every tech, every nurse, every admin, every cook, every driver, every janitor who's ever said, *"I just want to help people — but I can't survive doing it like this."*

To those people: we hear you. We are you.

So if you're tired of being burned out, dismissed, overruled, and underpaid, there's a seat at this table.

And if you're not ready for that? If you're still trying to protect the old way? Step aside.

Because we're not building slowly. We're not building quietly. We're building something that will change what's possible — for the people who give everything and ask for nothing.

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And this is the line in the sand. Let's fucking build.

-Christopher

For more information, to connect, or learn more - reach out to us!

Or find us on social and see what we're building – in public.

@HelloAvaHealth on all platforms.

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