



## **Neon Hypocrisy**

**by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP**

Many organizations (perhaps most of them) have a value that states, "People are our most important asset." It stands to reason why this should be the case. People are usually the biggest expense item in the budget of an organization. They hold the intellectual capital of the organization. They do the research on future streams of products. They produce the current products or services. They sell the output of the organization. They work with the suppliers and vendors who make production possible. They administer the business and keep things working financially. So, any organization would be insane to not recognize that people really are their most important asset.

You can see the phrase on the values plaque in the lobby of most companies. In fact, it is often the number one or number two value listed because it comes out first as the top brass sit down to dream up things like values statements. The problem is that the dreaming phase does not match the execution phase. It is in the daily actions of managers and leaders at all levels that the hypocrisy of the statement shines like a neon sign to everyone who works in the company. Most managers simply do not act as if they believe people are the most important asset. Most employees walk past the values plaque in the lobby and don't pay any attention to it. After all, if management is not behaving consistently with the value, why should employees believe the value is operational?

Meanwhile, in the conference rooms, computer notes, offices, private discussions, decision meetings, town hall meetings, and every possible form of interaction, managers are dealing with the business of business and ignoring the neon value sitting out in the lobby.

As younger generation workers begin to filter in from high school and colleges, a greater sense of personal self esteem is arriving with them, and organizations will need to show more respect for people than in the past. Younger generations are not willing to endure corporate jargon that does not match observable behavior, and it is not just a corporate phenomenon either. We can clearly see a trend of less tolerance for duplicity in the

broader society as we witness social unrest all over the world from the "Tea-Party" to the riots in Egypt. People seek an environment that fulfills their sense of purpose. They are less tolerant of corruption from the Town Hall to the Union Hall. If leaders are going to spout out platitudes about people being the most important organizational asset, they need to start acting that way!

Just imagine what you would see if an organization really did believe in the neon value. What would it look like? Here are some ideas, and you can fill in other examples for yourself:

1. Managers would take the time to interface with most employees on most days. They would not be cloistered in conference rooms, deciding whether or not to tell people about the impending layoff or how to posture the latest benefits cut.
2. Communication would be intended to help engage people, not be a feeble attempt to spin the latest information in an effort to avoid a revolt.
3. People would have a sense that upper management really wants them to get as much development as possible to be able to rise to their potential, rather than having managers check off the boxes to record that each employee had all the mandatory hazard training for the year.
4. Recognition for good work would be spontaneous and light hearted instead of an obligation to be performed begrudgingly and with insincerity.
5. Flexibility would be evident when employees have personal issues or family matters to deal with instead of maintaining strict discipline so managers will not be accused of playing favorites.
6. Trust would be in abundant evidence in all matters rather than a CYA mentality to document all forms of behavior not according to strict guidelines.
7. CEOs would not tolerate a multiple of 300X between their salary and that of an average production worker.
8. Ethical decisions would be made because it is just good business rather than to comply with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act.
9. Corporate jets would be sold, so top leaders would deal with the same travel hassles as their "most important asset."
10. Management washrooms would be gutted and made into cultural centers where all employees could learn to appreciate each other more.
11. Organizations would welcome social networking and transparency rather than try to seek ways to restrict these trends out of fear of being exposed.
12. Managers would spend less energy trying to explain financial performance to Wall Street and more energy trying to improve the culture of their organization.
13. Leaders at all levels would learn the value of praising people who express a concern about inconsistencies. Thus, they would be *building higher trust* on a daily basis by *reinforcing candor*.

I believe the neon value is a wonderful ideal. It does express the right attitude toward the value of people. We need to encourage all leaders to make their actions and policies be consistent with the words. Some organizations have been able to accomplish that to a large degree. These groups have reached the status of the best companies to work for in America. Leaders who habitually pay lip service to the neon value will feel more and more like Hosni Mubarak sitting in his palace watching the mob outside throwing stones at the windows.



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