



Instilling Values

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

A vital function of leadership is to instill a coherent set of values in the organization. Notice I did not say the function is to "articulate" good values. Too many leaders believe the job is done when there is a set of values hanging on the wall. Unfortunately, that attitude does more harm than good because any hypocrisy in living the values ends up undermining the whole concept.

Leaders need to exemplify the values and talk about them at every opportunity for them to become firmly planted into the hearts of the organization's people. Here are some tips that can make your values shine and create a foundational bedrock for the work of your business.

Create the values together

Values do not come from one person. They are aggregated into being through a process of creation and selection. There are literally thousands of values one could choose. Words like integrity, loyalty, respect, trust, and flexibility are frequent choices. Less often used, but equally effective are words like honor, dependability, family, innovation, and transparency. It is important for people in the organization to participate in the crafting of a master brainstorm list and the voting on how to winnow the list to a vital few.

Don't have too many values

To be most helpful, values must reside in the hearts of the population and be simple enough to remember. It is a mistake to have a dozen or more values for an organization. Few people will be able to remember the entire set. I recommend five values, or six at the most. These will form the core of why we do what we do. Then it is a simple matter of doing a pareto vote to cull out the less important candidates from the longer list.

Announce the values

Make sure everyone knows the values by communicating them at every possible opportunity. Say things like, "We have decided to admit our mistake because one of our core values is transparency." As people hear a value reinforced every time it is modeled by leaders in the organization, it becomes stronger and more useful to the business.

Reinforce people who point out inconsistencies

If an action or decision does not appear to be consistent with a stated value, it is important to encourage and reinforce employees who point out the apparent contradiction. If employees are stifled or punished when they voice concern over a possible lapse, then they will clam up, and the values will quickly lose their potency for the organization. If people are rewarded for bringing up concerns, then the values will spring to life and remain vibrant.

Allow infrequent changes

Values form a bedrock for the actions of a community. It is important that these statements of intent have stability, and yet it is a mistake to be totally rigid. If an additional value to the current list would help clarify some common activities, feel free to add a new value with great ceremony. Beyond some number, it is wise to retire a less relevant value when adding a new one. This can be tricky because no value is totally useless. If you retire a value, make sure to state it is still important, just less frequently called upon in the current environment.

Reinforce actions consistent with the values

The easiest way to perpetuate actions consistent with the values is to reinforce people when they follow them. A simple thank you is not sufficient reinforcement here. The conversation should sound more like this, "That was a great point Martha. When you recognized Ed for not backing down in the face of pressure from the angry employee, you demonstrated consistency, which is one of our key values."

The magic in having values is teaching all people to model them every day, but that is only half of the job. You must make the connection between actions and values highly visible at every opportunity to ensure the values drive the right behaviors far into the future.

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