

# Making values work for you

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Everyone is governed by values. Both at work and in our personal lives our attitudes as well as our behaviours are shaped by our deep-seated values. There are three questions we should ask ourselves: Where do these values come from? How do they show themselves in action? And - What is the likely impact of them on my life, my work?

Where do values come from?

Often one person's values may be a complete mystery to another person, but they are very important nonetheless. The reason is that although they come from within and are deep-seated, we do not, ordinarily state them out loud, so to speak. However, they form the foundation of our being. If we were to express our values, say in writing, or even as a verbal statement, that expression will make explicit what our principles or core beliefs are.

It is important, perhaps, to recognise that we are not born with values. We learn them and do so from an early age. Usually, our values are shaped by our family, and beyond that, the community we in which we grow up. In everyday life, this is most obvious in cultural and religious differences, because they often govern what food people eat or the way in which they dress.

However, within organisations, how values evolve, can be less obvious. Sometimes the culture of the organisation and its resulting set of values ("the way we do things around here ...") is the result of past history as well as personalities that are no longer around. Often this background is not explicit or even communicated when the newcomer joins the organisation.

In fact, many organisations simply reduce their values to bland statements that support their "Mission", which in turn often boils down to something trite about making money for shareholders or serving customers and attracting the best people. A little reflection on our own personal values will soon tell us why this feels so unsatisfactory. We hold our personal values very dearly because they tell us WHO we are, and each of us sees ourselves as being unique - a special individual, BUT we also see ourselves in the context of a group that has a real identity. As in: "I am Welsh", or "I am a Sikh", and so forth. This may seem unimportant, until we look at the modern business environment and realise that to remain competitive organisations primarily need to differentiate themselves from their competitors. How in fact does a customer choose between say, solicitors, insurance agents, accountants and banks, when they all do pretty much the same thing and the price range is limited?

The answer then is, the feel of the organisation, which is to say its culture and that is the sum total of its values. So-called excellent organisations are those that have clear values, well communicated to the staff, the customers and even to its other business partners, such as suppliers. To everyone involved with them, these organisations feel right.

How do values show themselves in action?

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the old saying goes. What people see is what counts. Well, what is it that people see? Forget the glossy brochures, forget the well-polished mom & apple pie statements of the public relations or advertising. The answer is: The behaviours of the people working in the organisation. Whenever we interact or communicate with others, we show our values through how we behave. We show them in a thousand ways through subtle little signs, both visual and aural. Our body language, what we wear, how we wear it, our speech tones, our speech inflection, or even simply our idioms and expressions, broadcast how we feel and sometimes, even what we believe in. Usually our feelings are linked to our values. Behaviour demonstrates our values in action.

Most organisations understand this and most customer care training concentrates on changing behaviours. However, behaviour, unsupported by genuinely held values, is usually both superficial and insincere. And it is often obvious to the observer. Humans are the species that have the widest range and talents for communication. We are natural, born communicators. But, we are adept not just at sending signals. We read them pretty well too. You and your organisation can fool some of the people some of the time, but not all of them all of the time (to borrow a phrase from Abraham Lincoln). Therefore it is imperative that members of any organisation, not only walk the walk as well as talk the talk, they must sincerely, believe and subscribe to the organisation's values too.

What is the impact of our values on our lives and my work?

The short answer is - a lot. People without clearly defined values to govern their lives are likely to feel rootless and at the very least feel unfulfilled. In the worst cases they may inflict damage on society as well as themselves through anti-social behaviour. Anyone may think what they like, but when they act, it has consequences.

Similarly, within organisations: When values are poorly defined and/or only paid lip-service to, the organisation becomes a poor performer. The key indicators that an organisation is performing poorly are: falling profits and/or steeply rising costs, shrinking customer-bases, loss of market share, high staff loss, turnover or incessant industrial action. The organisational decline can be so fast that the organisation, is deserted by its financial backers, shunned by its customers and sabotaged by its own staff so that it literally crashes overnight.

Therefore organisations need to pay careful attention to their values. Not only, must the values be crystal clear to all, but these values must not conflict, in any important way, with the values of the staff AND they need to be meaningful to the staff, as ordinary people. Most people work mainly to get money to support themselves and their families. They do not lie on their death beds and say: "Gee, I wish I had spent more time in the office". Similarly, people enjoy being part of something meaningful, fun and real. They certainly never say: "Wow, I bet that will put another 10 p on the value of my company's shares ..."

Sometimes, however, organisations, striving for excellent customer care, ride rough-shod over their staff. This unwittingly sets up a conflict of interest between staff and customers. Staff who are forced into such a rigid customer care mould that is uncaring of their needs or feelings will at the least be demotivated and appear insincere. At worst they may actively (and secretly) be sabotaging the business. Worse yet, an organisation may espouse good values, but the managers who lead the

organisation, may behave so badly towards staff, customers and suppliers, that the real message sent is totally contrary to the intended one. For example there was once an airline whose slogan was: "Above all we care for you best", but which was so badly managed and became so rickety as a result, that its (ex) customers used to enjoy misquoting it as "Above all we scare you worst".

So, overall, the message is: Values are important - everyone is influenced by them. Communicate clear values, so that everyone, staff, customers and suppliers know who you are and what you stand for. Finally, if a common set of values are sincerely held by all in the organisation, it will be more likely that the people who work in that organisation will be more productive and motivated.

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