

The Value of Values

How Creating a Culture of Actionable Values Impacts Employee Effectiveness and Business Success

by John Turgeon, CPA, HCS, Partner

As a teenager, I remember coming home after a night out with my friends at a local amusement park. It was very uncharacteristic of me to do so but, before I went to bed, I left a note for my mother asking her to call in sick for me in the morning at the grocery store where I worked. The next morning, about an hour before my shift was to begin, she woke me up and asked how I was feeling. I told her I was fine, but that I just didn't feel like going in because I had arrived home late. Needless to say, she wouldn't stand for that excuse. She told me we didn't do things like that in our family, and said in no uncertain terms: go to work.

Nearly 40 years later, the experience remains a vivid memory. I remember exactly how I felt when asked if I was truly sick. And, I distinctly remember the ultimate lesson I learned about what was right and what was wrong. More importantly, I realized at that moment how I wanted people to think of me going forward. I could feel one of my values—*integrity*—stirring inside of me.

Every day, each one of us makes hundreds of decisions, if not more, about our families, our work, or other activities. And while we likely won't be able to explain exactly how we came to each of those decisions, there is a good chance every one of them was impacted by the personal values we carry around inside us.



As one might expect, our values are developed over many years and across many experiences. It's not as if someone hands us a set of values when we're young and says, "hang on to these—you'll need them someday." Instead, our values—the core of who we are—tend to be the result of not only what our parents pass along to us, but also the principles for which our employers, colleagues, and friends all stand. Furthermore, the sentiment and meaning behind each value is not something that gets pulled from a dictionary. Rather, each definition is slowly shaped through trial and error—from experiencing success to dealing with failure and from watching the actions of others to dealing with the affects of our own decisions, such as asking someone to call in "sick" for us.

Sound personal? It is personal, but it also has a lot to do with business. Unfortunately, some leaders overlook that fact. They might consider the core values of a business to be part of its marketing strategy rather than an action that an organization needs to demonstrate each and every day. That viewpoint could not be further from the truth. If, as leaders, we want to change the results of our business, we need to do more than talk; we need to "walk the walk." We need to change the experiences we are creating for our people and do so by modeling the values and behaviors we seek from them.

One of the first questions we often ask individuals and teams when assisting them with improving their effectiveness is, "What can you tell me about your company's core values?" Most are not able to articulate them. They might say they remember seeing them on the company's website when they were interviewing for the position, but never discussed them. Others have said they learned nothing about them at all. What a shame. One of the many benefits of actually having—and helping your teams understand—the core values of your organization is that you will be providing them with a compass which they can use to navigate through the challenges of today's business. When the business focuses on the core values, from the top down, everything employees do—from how they treat each other to how they work with your customers or vendors and approach their responsibilities—will all be aligned with what your business needs for continued success. Without them, there is no clarity and it becomes strictly guesswork. Few organizations have winning percentages following that approach.

So where do you start? Perhaps it's a cliché, but the tone needs to be set at the top—the top of your organization or at least at the top of your team. Think of the span of control or, better yet, the span of influence a leader will have with any size group. If he or she "lives and breathes" the values of that organization, and then holds those around them accountable to the same, it will only be a matter of time before the waves of that value-based culture ripple through the rest of organization.

Simply put:

**Culture =
Values + Consistency in Action.**

Companies with established values will realize tangible results: from the ability of employees to make better customer service decisions to improved team

dynamics. For example, if your business has established excellence, innovation, and teamwork as its core values, then those hundred or so decisions your employees will make everyday can be made knowing full well that they must place great importance on going beyond the minimum and striving to distinguish the business by what it delivers to others. They will know that the organization not only embraces new ideas, it expects and encourages its employees to spend time creatively thinking outside of the box. They will also fully understand that the organization strongly supports an environment of

should come aboard and join you on your journey. In either case, the resulting core values need to be shared, discussed at team meetings, embedded in the organization's performance management system, and modeled by its leaders day in and day out in order to really have meaning. It is about more than adding it on the back of your business card.

Regularly sharing and demonstrating your core values is also important because people want to be connected to organizations that they know are "good" businesses; ones that place a premium on such things as ethics and

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collaboration and cooperation. That learning experience alone will positively impact their daily decisions.

Steve Jobs told his employees shortly after returning to Apple in 1997, "Marketing is not about touting features and speeds and megabytes or comparing yourself to the other guys. It's about identifying your own story, your own core, and being very, very clear about what you are all about and what you stand for...and then being able to communicate that clearly, simply and consistently."

The exercise of establishing your values does not have to be difficult, but it does require some organizational self-reflection, facilitation, and discussion. In many cases, the core values already exist in the feelings and actions of your people, but need to be extracted, formally declared, and then defined for clarity. In other cases, such as with a relatively new entrepreneurial venture, it might be slightly more challenging because you are truly setting the organization's values for the first time and then driving a stake in the ground around those values as you decide which new employees

trust as well as those that "do good" by focusing on their communities and helping those less fortunate. In fact, we believe employees in those organizations are likely to become more loyal and, as a result, be more productive. This sentiment also holds true for an organization's clients and customers; they want to do business with companies that they know have strong values that resemble their own.

Is there a cost associated with all of this effort? Sure there is. Just as there is a cost with sitting idle and letting whatever happens happen. The latter is likely to be much more expensive to your business in the long run. The difference between the two approaches is the "Value of Values." ■



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