

Don't Weaponize These Principles

Nine methods for scaling creative decisions — how to inspire good decision-making without stifling creativity or inspiring competitive animosity.

Even the best intentions can lead to unintended consequences. You can't always predict every consequence of your actions. The law of unintended consequences has legal fiat over growing a business, too.

As a leader you could try to instill a culture of efficient top-down management — only to end up stifling creativity. Or you could let a thousand flowers bloom, only to spend all your time herding very inspired cats.

When Corporate Principles Go Bad

We went to a meeting with a large, famously successful company once. According to lore, their company values played a large part of that success. Every employee knew the values, and several invoked them in our meeting. The problem was that the employees used the values against each other to make argumentative points. They had created a successful business with hard-working, values-driven employees, but the unintended consequence was the employees used those values against each other like cudgels.

Creating Better Principles

Principles shouldn't be vague imperatives like 'be a team player' — what does that mean exactly? Conversely, principles shouldn't be vague virtues like 'honesty' and 'respect.' That equates a principle to a static, unchanging thing. Principles aren't a destination; they're a method of traveling. Principles should be a manual for making decisions — a heuristic that helps employees consistently make the best possible decisions without supervision.

The Nine Principles

Make relationships before things: All work begins with deciding what kind of relationship you want to have with your audience. Pay attention to how people and elements relate to their neighbors.

Be curious and masterful: Humans are happiest when they have a sense of purpose, mastery, and autonomy. Identify your purpose, strive for mastery in your domain, and feel empowered to make creative decisions.

Consider the whole human: We are more than our job titles. Practice empathy in your regard for how others work and feel. Actively balance your personal life and work.

Seek the most interesting challenges: We do our best work when a project intrigues us and sparks our curiosity. Strive to find the odd-sized problems and tackle the largest obstacles. The path forward is the path through resistance.

Find better explanations: Creative work is a process of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Work tirelessly to reduce that uncertainty by questioning authority and assumptions, testing your ideas, and embracing constructive criticism.

Aim for outputs, optimize inputs: Begin with the output in mind, but work tirelessly to optimize the inputs so that your work becomes consistent, repeatable, and reliable.

Get to useful quickly: Time is precious. So are results. In all endeavors, we must have a bias for generating results. Avoid analysis paralysis.

Look at your fish: Insight often comes not from noticing something new, but in noticing something that's been there all along. Always look closely at your surroundings and ask: 'What haven't I noticed yet?'

Do nothing but your best work: Our responsibility is to bring our deepest thinking, most considered approaches, and most compelling work. Create work that will over-deliver on its usefulness and will be beautiful for years to come.

And the final mandate: Whatever you do, don't weaponize these principles. Don't use them against each other.