

Are Your Organization's Values Authentic or Merely Aspirational?

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Sound Familiar?

It's three weeks to your company's next quarterly earnings statement and the CEO wants to bolster income to reassure investors that the company's market leader status remains secure in the face of some stiff competition. As a result, pressure is coming down from the top to expedite the release of a new product despite some deep-seated misgivings from the development team concerning potential safety hazards under certain operating conditions.

Passing through reception on the way to your office, your eye goes to a framed statement of the organization's Core Values and you wince inwardly as you read the five imperatives listed there:

- *Everything we do is for our customer's benefit*
- *We strive to deliver excellent products of outstanding quality*
- *We respect the views and opinions of all our stakeholders*
- *We act with integrity – always*
- *We are committed to providing a return on our shareholder's investment*

Pressing for an early release of this product demonstrates an absolute disregard for all but one of these values: putting the customer's safety at risk is hardly acting in his or her best interest; releasing a sub-optimal product shows how little quality means; ignoring the

protests of the development team displays disdain for those employees and the act of compromising these values exemplifies a lack of integrity.

When the chips are down, it's clear that your CEO prioritizes short-term profit ahead of other values.

What Went Wrong?

Unfortunately, stories like this are not rare. So what is the problem? Why do we see organizations acting in blatant contravention of their purported values?

Clearly, there are many contributing factors, from rampant short-termism to screwed-up executive incentive schemes, but I'd like to focus on one of the most obvious, yet least spoken about causes – the aspirational value.

It is unfortunate that, in many cases, core values are seen as purely aspirational rather than real, hard-edged principles to which the organization wholeheartedly commits itself. I've attended more than one offsite gathering where, in the space of half an hour, the executive team has simply brainstormed a list of core values. Values derived in this manner usually bear little relationship to those actually embedded in the organization's culture, or if they do, it's purely by accident. They are, in effect, no more than a laundry list of unconnected ideals. Choosing values because they have a nice ring to them or because this is

how we think the organization should behave is an exercise in futility. The first time they are put to the test against the authentic values of the organization, they will be traded off without a backward glance.

Drucker said ‘Culture eats strategy for lunch’, implying that even the best strategies will fail unless supported by the organization’s culture. And since culture is the manifestation of the organization’s values, beliefs and collective behaviors, it follows that the successful implementation of any strategy depends, at least in part, on its alignment with the values that are actually in play. If your strategy is aligned with values that are merely aspirational, it is doomed to fail at the first hurdle.

In a way, it’s unfortunate that values are so often linked to vision – we speak about ‘vision and values’ and we display them together on the ‘About Us’ page of the company website. By definition, vision is aspirational – something towards which the organization strives. Perhaps, through their association with vision, values have also come to be seen as something to aspire to rather than something to live by.

Discover, Don’t Impose

If there’s a disconnect between your organization’s stated core values and the behavior of its decision-makers, it’s probable that the values are simply aspirational. In that case, it’s time to consign them to the dumpster, shiny frame and all, and go in search of the values that determine the way decisions are really made in the organization. Depending on how it’s done, the values discovery process may necessitate a bigger or smaller investment in time and

money. However, continued reliance on the serendipitous outcome of a half-hour of brainstorming session that took place after lunch on the second day of the annual offsite five years ago, is likely to result in substantially higher cost over the long term.

The most efficient way to discover your organization’s true values is to provide employees with a list of universal organizational values¹ and ask them to indicate which ones they believe are consistently applied within the organization, which ones are routinely disregarded and which are knowingly violated. This approach has several benefits:

- Consensus on the organization’s true values is readily achieved
- The common framework allows anomalies to be easily identified
- Values that are thought to be violated are immediately evident

The idea of ‘discovering’ the organization’s values rather than trying to impose them from above represents an important shift in management philosophy that appears to be gaining sway through the examples set by successful leaders such as Tony Hsieh² at Zappos.

Discovery of the organization’s authentic values is, of course, not the end of the journey. Continued growth or the pursuit of new opportunities will inevitably call for some shift in the organization’s culture and as a result certain values may become more important and others less important over time. As the custodian of culture, it is the CEO’s responsibility to ensure that the organization’s core values remain relevant and authentic and do not enter the realm of aspiration.

¹ Consilient Inc. has a validated framework of 56 universal organizational values

² “How Zappos Infuses Culture Using Core Values”, Tony Hsieh, HBR Blog Network, May, 2010

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