

Why Aren't Your Employees Getting Behind the New Strategy?

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A long, long time ago...

Picture this: A ragtag band of medieval infantrymen huddles in the meager shelter afforded by a stony outcrop at the edge of a forest of birch and oak. It's early November, and the bare trees offer little resistance to the cold North wind, which slices through the soldiers' threadbare clothes. They are battle-weary, hungry and their wages are many weeks overdue.

A knight rides up and addresses them. "Men!" he cries, "The enemy has been sighted barely two miles from here. We must defend this position at all costs. Arise and follow me!"



How enthusiastically do you think they would respond?

Now imagine that the knight arrives leading a wagon filled with supplies: food, warm clothing, additional weaponry and a chest containing their back-pay. This time, he addresses them differently: "Men! I have gone to great lengths to bring you much-needed supplies as well as payment for your valiant defense of our realm. Fill your bellies, warm

your bodies and re-arm yourselves but do so with haste, for the enemy has been sighted barely two miles from here. When you are done, follow me."

I'm no expert in the psyche of medieval soldiers, but I suspect they would comply with alacrity.

More recently...

This simplistic 'Maslowian' example came to mind recently during a values discovery engagement we were conducting for a new client. The CEO was spearheading the formulation of a new strategy intended to re-energize the organization and return it to a more dominant position in the market. A new set of core values had been earmarked to rally employees and engage them in the strategy implementation process. Our job was to determine the degree of alignment between these values and those currently embedded in the organization's culture.

Several town hall meetings had already been held to spread the word about the company's new strategy but, despite management's best efforts, the effect on employee motivation was underwhelming. Some employees acknowledged the CEO's good intentions, but there was general skepticism that meaningful transformation would result.

More worrying were widespread allegations of favoritism, a lack of transparency in the way decisions affecting individuals were taken, and

a general belief that senior management had little or no respect for employees. Some employees were reluctant to speak out for fear of being victimized by their managers.

Simply put, we found a wide disparity between the core values which management expected the organization to espouse and the current reality that employees experienced on a daily basis.

Whereas the new values statement included terms like excellence, innovation, teamwork and respect, employees observed behaviors that routinely *violated* values of empowerment, openness, respect and trust. These negatives completely swamped the message that the CEO was trying to convey.

As a result, the troops remained unmoved by the general's rhetoric.

Changing the message: Actions speak louder than words

Until the issues preoccupying the minds of employees were dealt with, management could not expect them to rally behind the new strategy. A two-phased remedy was thus proposed:

a) Phase 1 – Re-establish trust:

- Remove anyone who routinely or willfully violates the company's core values
- Entrench *respect* as a fundamental part of the company culture – starting with the way executives and managers deal with staff
- Implement systems and processes to ensure transparency in decisions affecting individuals
- Open a communication channel for employees to raise issues of concern with management – and follow through with action

- Continually reaffirm management's commitment to change

b) Phase 2 – Lead with purpose:

- Identify values that most clearly support the behaviors required to achieve the organization's strategic objectives (note: these may or may not be the values earmarked earlier by management)
- From these, select one or two values that have the greatest potential to inspire the organization and incorporate this (or these) into a rallying cry / call to action / motto / tagline
- Use every opportunity to weave this rallying cry into the organization's cultural fabric
- Reinforce management's commitment to the identified core values by assiduous adherence to behaviors that are consistent with those values and swift, visible sanction in cases of behaviour that violates them

The process is currently underway, so the jury is still out. I suspect, though, that if these recommendations are followed, the organization will see a new dawn heralding a much brighter future.

Lessons for management

As Peter Drucker famously pointed out, trouble ensues when an organization pursues a strategy that depends on values that are not entrenched in the culture. Why then do management teams so often ignore their organizations' culture and values when formulating strategy? We believe it is because culture (and especially values) have traditionally been seen as 'soft fuzzies' – things that are impossible to quantify and therefore difficult to manage. While they are acknowledged as an important part of the

workings of an organization, they are conveniently passed over in favor of 'hard' variables that managers can more readily see, touch and control.

Our research shows that companies that embrace their values are more likely to succeed than those that don't – irrespective of the specific values embraced. The particular core values an organization chooses to espouse are thus less important than its adherence to those values.

But this presupposes that employees are naturally receptive and will simply follow whatever values management chooses to pursue. Unfortunately, this is not always true, as the case presented here shows. Unfulfilled needs or specific grievances, if widespread in

an organization, act as natural inhibitors and shift employees' focus away from all management initiatives that do not directly address them. Until or unless these issues are dealt with, they continue to poison the culture and hinder the implementation of new initiatives – perversely, even initiatives that could improve that culture.

The bottom line is that, before management embarks on any new initiative, it would do well to [assess the cultural landscape](#) and inform itself, not only of any gaps between current and desired values, but also to identify any urgent issues preoccupying employees' minds that would make them less receptive to being led in a new direction.

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