

Getting Real About Leadership

A series of challenges to the way we think about Leadership and Organisation Development

When Values Fly out of the Window

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Mouse Mats and Screensavers

At some point over the last few years, your organisation will most likely have gone through a process of identifying and committing to an updated set of organisational values. The evidence of the last round of values-revitalisation will probably still be visible; on posters, mouse mats, screensavers, banners, coasters and so on. One organisation we worked with issued pens that on each click of the barrel produced a different value. Another, printed T-shirts that are no doubt now faded and languishing somewhere at the bottom of a washing basket.

Your organisation's last foray into values might have been prompted by a major external or internal event; a change in regulation, a shift in customer expectations, the appointment of a new CEO and so on. While the sources of inspiration for refreshing organisational values can be many and varied, the specific motivation for holding values in the first instance remains fairly consistent. Values answer an important 'how' question. They highlight the principles

by which business will be done, and what customers and stakeholders can expect of the enterprise. They convey what an organisation cares about; what it will stand for and stand against. If done well, and they can align with personal values, they can provide a powerful incentive to the workforce.

When the Going Gets Tough

During a period of business-as-usual, organisational values can go largely unnoticed; we assume they are humming away in the background offering a guiding hand in the work that is done. But in times of pressure and volatility we really start to see the rubber hit the road. Arguably it is only during times of real difficulty that we see our organisational values being tested. And so, as we cut to the unprecedented circumstances of the current pandemic, we are presented with an opportunity to consider what our organisational values actually mean, or put another way, whether we actually mean them.

Over the last few months there have been a series of stories that have

provoked public outrage. These have ranged from examples of poor behaviour from national airlines as they have flouted rules around social distancing and the wearing of masks onboard, to super-rich business owners who have accessed public funds through government furlough schemes, rather than absorbing costs through their personal fortunes. We have witnessed holiday companies that have instituted Kafkaesque systems to prevent customers from claiming refunds for unfulfilled holidays. We have watched while some Universities have provided unacceptable levels of online instruction while charging full rate for tuition fees. We have seen retail groups selling clothing that refused to close at the start of lockdown erroneously claiming they were providing essential services, and we've watched on while companies have crammed employees into unsafe working conditions in distribution centres.

Personally, we have spoken to employees who have felt isolated, unfairly treated, and left in the dark about their futures, and have seriously doubted whether they are working for the organisation they thought they were.

Is All Fair in Love and War?

One explanation for this kind of behaviour might be that *all is fair in love and war*, and while companies haven't been at war, they have been fighting for their lives during this time of pandemic. This might be a reasonable argument were it not for the fact that, thankfully, there are just as many high-profile companies and individuals that have done the right

thing and stuck by their values; retail companies that have given large discounts to key workers for their services. Companies that have given furlough money back to the government unasked. Luxury goods manufacturers that have re-orientated to producing PPE and sanitisers that they have donated to under-resourced front-line staff. And footballers, no less, that have re-purposed their assets such as hotels for the homeless.

Our first question therefore is:

- **Since the pandemic struck, which side of this dividing line has your organisation stepped towards? Are there occasions in which the organisation has acted in ways that are contrary to its stated values?**

There is a much broader point at stake too which similarly requires some honest reflection. And this is whether, in practice, organisational values are anything more than performative. We are thinking here not only about during the hard times, but the rest of the time too.

What if Values Meant Something?

If they are meaningful, we would expect a number of things to be true, for example:

- i. Organisational values would be articulated in clear, grounded and relatable terms. This is particularly important because values can very easily become abstract and at times quite meaningless. Many organisations have values that refer to concepts such as

‘inclusivity’, ‘excellence’, ‘professionalism’, ‘integrity’, ‘stewardship’ ‘respect’ and so on. All of these are laudable, but concepts such as these, even accompanied by a rallying sentence, will rarely tell you enough of what you need to know. *Are your organisation’s values clearly articulated, grounded and relatable?*

ii. Organisational values would be built into the fabric of the enterprise and expressed in its systems and processes. For example, if an organisation has a stated value around ‘innovation’, we would expect there to be evidence of this in its processes – procurement, governance, customer services. If instead, procurement processes are bureaucratic, slow and lack innovation, or governance arrangements seem old fashioned and un-diverse, or complaints procedures are arcane and unresponsive, then this will tell us what the organisation really thinks about innovation. *Are your organisation’s values sewn into the fabric of its processes and systems?*

iii. Organisational values would shape the culture so that it would be normal for behaviours that honour the values to be rewarded, and sanctions applied for behaviours that contradict the values. While some organisations might hold annual values awards or create a fanfare around their launch, our question is; *Is it normal in your*

organisation for behaviours that exemplify or contradict organisational values to be called out and action to be taken?

iv. Organisational values would be actively role-modelled by the leadership. The shortest route to neutralising values is for the organisation to turn a blind eye when leaders ignore them. *Do your leaders model the organisation’s values? Are there examples of leaders who appear to exempt themselves from the values?*

Our second question is:

- **Does this checklist of requirements reflect your organisation’s treatment of its values? To what degree might your organisation’s values be more performative than authentically enacted?**

There is a practical way through much of this along the lines of what is described in this checklist. Organisations that mean it, will get their values up on their feet by taking these steps. They will bite the bullet too when times are hard and in spite of the *slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*, their values will flourish.

When the Curtain Comes Up

Here’s the kicker though. Typically, organisational values are the opposite of what you might expect them to be.

Where in practice we might see an enterprise that lives by competitiveness and silo thinking, it can be surprising to see a stated core value of

‘collaboration’. Where conservatism has not only been a defining value but a success factor for an organisation, it is striking to learn that it professes to live and breathe innovation. Where we see followership, the value statement will list ‘leadership’, and where we experience political behaviour and influencing strategies, the words on the values poster say, ‘honesty and openness’.

In these instances, rather than deeply held foundational principles; values function like a layer of gloss paint applied to the exterior of the organisation every few years. At worst they are an exercise in virtue signalling, at times a cynical recruitment ploy.

This gap between espoused and enacted values might simply be an expression of the journey that the organisation needs to take.

But for this to be successful the organisation needs to:

- **Understand where it is now;** the current set of values actually in play. And with this in mind, calculate the distance that needs to be travelled, and the order of magnitude of the task
- **Understand the part that is played by the existing values in the success of the organisation** (to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater)
- **Be prepared to reach past the pot of gloss paint, and the mouse mats,** and with clear-eyed honesty commit to the level of work necessary to change or revitalise something as fundamental as values.

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