

Levels of Alignment

Every organisation in the world operates on values whether it knows it or not. This statement is true because every organisation in the world has preferences and priorities. Those that operate with their values in a deliberate and organised manner create for themselves a distinct advantage over competitors in their market, by shaping and defining their own culture, levels of performance and success.

A recent conversation with a CEO of an organisation typifies the limited awareness leaders often have in relation to the role and importance of their organisations' values. When asked about the work that had been done with values in her organisation, she responded, "Values, yeah we did all that two years ago, that's them on the wall over there."

As the conversation progressed it became very apparent that she was convinced that having a list of values articulated on her office wall meant they were probably alive and well within the business. Many leaders we have met are under the same impression. That to have a set of values for your organisation all you need do is write them out and announce them.

With the release of the excellent Collins and Porris book *Built to Last* (Random House 1998) leadership teams the world over, headed off to strategic retreat sessions to identify their core purpose and define, discover or create their core values. The benefits of doing so as outlined in *Built to Last* were compelling. Organisations could expect to improve performance, lift share value, attain greater growth, and most impressively, create sustainable leadership within their market.

However, as values consultants to many organisations, it has been our experience that often those charged with creating the organisation's values have often confused values with the likes or morals, ethics, emotions, and beliefs. The end result? The paying of little more than lip service to a set of 'values' that were quickly put aside, ignored or scoffed at as people busied themselves with business as usual.

One of the key omissions, by those charged with the creation of the values, is in the area of values alignment. Values alignment means ensuring the values are the best for the organisation, that they actually are heading in the same direction as the company's strategy, vision and mission, and support the delivery of its core business. It is not surprising that many organisations omit the factor of alignment from their values creation process given that 'alignment' is not a common component of most business education programmes.

It is, however, a pity because even a brief overview of this anthropological and psychological model (created to define and understand culture), will add immense clarity about the role of values in organisations. Chief amongst these models has been the work of American anthropologist Gregory Bateson¹.

Bateson identified that any culture can be observed as operating within a distinct set of levels. His theory was later adapted and extended by Robert Dilts, a pioneer and expert in the field of Neuro Linguistic Programming. Dilts' adaptation of Bateson's work suggests that an organisation is the result of the interaction of what he refers to as its Logical Levels.

Dilts identified a number of Logical Levels that typically define an organisation's culture and leadership. These are its Purpose, Identity, Values and Beliefs, Capabilities, Behaviours, and Environment.

LEVEL	EXPLANATION	DEFINES
PURPOSE	The reason you exist; Your core business	What you are offering
IDENTITY	Who we perceive ourselves as; Your identity or brand	Distinguishing characteristics
VALUES	The belief systems about what's most important	Values, culture motivation
CAPABILITIES	Strategies, skills, competencies and resources	Direction and capability
BEHAVIOUR	What to do: language behaviours, communication	Actions and communication
ENVIRONMENT	Operating context and constraints	Competition, market, challenges

The benefits of applying such a simple model to organisational values is that it enables the values to be successfully linked or aligned to the overall structure of the organisation and its culture. We can see from this approach how values enable organisations to connect the more tangible aspect of their business, such as the levels of Capability, Behaviours and Environment to the less tangible and yet more influential higher levels of Identity and Purpose.

We have found that a change at any of these higher levels has a higher impact on the overall culture than those at the lower levels. In fact, a change at the top levels always influences change below, however, the reverse does not always apply.

As organisations begin to work with and understand the model, they begin to see values as the intangible and invisible threads behind all processes within the business including decision-making, communicating, strategising, recruitment, dismissal, sales, service, budgeting, marketing, planning, and evaluating. Failure to align the organisation's values throughout all levels of the organisation means that the values are, in reality, nothing more than the espoused values. Values alignment is the key to ensuring your organisation's values are at work within the business.



For more information on aligning values in your organisation contact Values AT Work:

Phone +64 9 372 2045 | **Email** info@valuesatwork.org | **Website** www.valuesatwork.org

¹ Bateson, Gregory. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Ballantine Books, New York.