

Working on Values

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Unlimited Magazine Issue 53 | Monday, 1 September 2003 | www.unlimited.co.nz

Does your company have values? It probably does. Maybe it even has them engraved on a brass plaque hanging in reception. Take a look. Find 'em? Good. Now, here's a better question: So what?

Especially for those in the trenches of day-to-day business, values seem like another warm fuzzy cooked up at a cushy executive retreat and circulated in a company-wide email that's best ignored until the next management fad comes along.

Or maybe not. Maybe you're just too damn cynical. Onesource chief executive Elaine Ford thinks so. So do top execs at Vodafone, Whitcoulls and Burger King NZ. Each of these companies has decided to become values-based, and the top brass knows that means more than putting a plaque on the wall. It means living it every day, at every level.

"People talk about values as though it's soft and easy — and maybe on a superficial level it is — but to actually do it is bloody hard work," says Hamish Wilkie, general manager of consumer marketing at Vodafone. "If you see somebody not behaving according to the values, you have to call them on it."

If that sounds a bit cultish, it is — in a positive kind of way.

Values 101

Still ready to pooh-pooh values? Fine, but first understand what they are. They're not the mission statement and they're not the vision. Nor are they ethics or morals, though they inform all of the above. According to Michael Henderson, values consultant and co-author of *Values at Work*, values are preferences multiplied by priority. That's the equation through which we filter all decisions. We all have values and we use them every day whether we realise it or not.

Some examples of personal values might be family, fun, security, adventure or honesty. For instance, if family is a more important value to you than fun, you might decide to turn down an invitation to go out with your mates in favour of helping your son with his homework. Maybe you're the type of person who hates even little white lies — honesty is an important value for you.

Organisational values work the same way. As Henderson states in his book: "You don't have a choice in whether your organisation works with values. You have a choice in how." At the guts of every company are hundreds of decisions that are made according to values such as innovation, customer service, quality, profit or expansion. The goal in a values-based organisation is to make sure everyone knows which of those values are most important and makes decisions accordingly. When that's not the case, you get "values misalignment" — consultant-speak for the cause of problems like miscommunication,

mistakes and missed opportunities. But just knowing the company values isn't enough. Which is why that plaque you just found doesn't automatically make your life any easier.

Alignment

If your organisation's values are different to your own, you're forced to make decisions that just don't feel right, you lose motivation and it's a lot easier to hate your job. "It's almost impossible for human beings to make choices that go against their personal values; it's that intuitive," Henderson says.

But when the two sets are aligned, it's a different story. Everything hums because everyone is on the same page. That's where Vodafone is at, three years into its value journey. It's reached what Henderson calls the "transformation" phase, where nobody has to read the plaques anymore (more on phases later). "Now, versus say 18 months ago, it's just part of the landscape," says Kieren Cooney, general manager of new markets. "If it was something you had to manually check off that would be the death of the values. It just becomes the currency of the company."

That's why Henderson says the most important part of being a values-based organisation is first helping people clarify what their own values are. At Onesource, Ford's first step was to ask Henderson to do a values workshop with her sales force. "I knew they were the ones who would make it or break it, so I wanted to test it with them." Henderson's workshop was the first phase: education. He explained what values are, how they work in people's lives, and how they work in organisations. When Ford's sales people emerged from the workshop more clear about their own values and eager to know more, she knew it was the right step.

At Burger King, that education and alignment is going to be crucial, since much of its workforce are teenagers not looking to build a career flipping burgers. The key, says operations manager Alan Watts, will be helping those employees understand how those ideas fit into their own lives.

Clarification

Once people understand values and how they work in their own lives, they are ready for the "clarification" phase. This is where you identify which values your company is currently running on, and which ones you'd like it to.

At Onesource, for example, Ford and her team discovered that the goal-centred nature of the organisation — setting a bar for people to jump over — was sometimes working against peoples' own values, either by making them sacrifice their personal lives trying to reach unrealistic targets, or by not expecting enough from them. So Ford removed the bar and called one of the values Peak Performance. Now, instead of just hitting pre-set quotas or goals, sales people are expected to do the best they can and are rewarded by commissions.

Another Onesource value is Peak Experience, which simply means making the company a better place to work through wellness programmes. “People want to know what’s in it for me, but once they examine their own values, they realise that’s often not just about money,” Ford says.

The final Onesource value is Tell the Truth, which means that everyone at every level is encouraged to speak up if they see a process that isn’t working, or a better way of doing things. “Last week I had a branch manager tell me he thought I should visit the branches more often,” Ford recalls. “The fact that he felt he could tell me how to do my job better meant to me that this is working.”

“Be prepared to be challenged,” says Vodafone human resources manager Jan Mottrem. “Be prepared for people to point out gaps in what you’re doing and what you’re espousing. You’re setting up an aspirational way of working. You have to let people know that if something or someone isn’t working according to the values, they have to be prepared to change it.”

Tribes, not clones

Henderson, who sometimes refers to himself as a corporate anthropologist, compares the transformation to being a values-based company to the formation of a tribe. “It comes together when you have a community with common values that wants to express them in a common way.” This doesn’t mean values have to be identical, it just means they need to complement each other. For example, if family is important to you, your organisation has to value your right to a work-home balance. If one of your values is advancement, your company has to support you working long hours to get there. “What you’re not doing is trying to make everyone a clone,” says Mottrem. “It’s a set of guiding principles. We’re not looking for 1200 robots.”

Henderson tells clients that they can expect to lose up to 9% of their workforce as they move through the process of becoming a values-based organisation. Neither Onesource nor Vodafone estimates losses that big, but both Wilkie and Cooney said they have had employees who’ve moved on.

Both companies agree the process isn’t easy. “If you’re not serious about it, don’t do it,” Mottrem says. “People’s bullshit meters are high and they will see if you’re not committed to it. It requires constant energy, but it’s worth it.” Wilkie puts it another way: “After working here, I can’t imagine working anywhere else.” Now how’s that for a company plaque, you cynical bastard?



For more information on Values AT Work Corporate Anthropologists, specialising in the clarification and alignment of personal and organisational values, contact us on:

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