

Do Organizations Have Values?

by Liz Mellon

People have values which can often be quite colorfully rendered—because it is their values that distinguish them from others. The Merriam-Webster dictionary’s broad definition of a value as “something (as a principle or quality) intrinsically desirable” makes it easy to identify innumerable values. Yet while organizations claim to have values, their expression, by contrast, is usually uninteresting or worse. So can an organization really have values? And if so, what do the stated values really mean?

What Values Are

Personal values are a complex miasma of personality traits and behaviors we learned as children. A child may be born with, say, a tendency for risk-taking and danger which her upbringing can mitigate or exacerbate. Constant reminders about the need to be careful may reduce risk-taking to the occasional late night out as an adult; allowing her sense of adventure to flourish, conversely, may result in an octogenarian who paraglides and rides a motorbike too fast. Personal values are the gauze through which we see the world and the mechanism by which we reach judgements about what we observe. So a risk-taking adult may regard risk aversion in another as demonstrating a lack of courage. Behavior observed, conclusion drawn, book closed.



The Tribe Whose Name is Dare

But what happens when values are applied to more than one person? Consider anthropologists who over the years have observed small tribes, often in remote locations: perhaps unsurprisingly, they documented common rites and rituals that built a sense of shared values transcending the individual. To take the risk-taking analogy further, a tribe with a majority of risk-takers might exacerbate this tendency and become courageous, dominant and warlike. Children born into that tribe would be socialized to share the dominant values through adult expectations of behaviors and attitudes.

When Tribes Go Global

Now consider organizations, NGOs and companies. Organizations also share rites and rituals that reinforce the dominance of certain behaviors above others: organizations with strong cultures (built on the basis of shared values) are the most challenging to join as a newcomer, since individuals sense immediately whether they fit or not – whether their values accord with those of the group.

So organizations can have values, but there remain two problems, one philosophical and the second pragmatic. The philosophical issue is that it is genuinely challenging to sustain a small and consistent set of values, especially across the complexity of a global organization. Instead, we tend to encounter a series of microcultures where different values prevail depending upon a range of factors including the type of work undertaken and the geographic location. Articulating a distinct set of values that purport to apply globally can be misleading.

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The pragmatic issue is that organizations tend to choose from a small set of words or phrases – though researchers routinely identify more than 500 human values – that fail either to distinguish the organization as an entity, or to clarify expectations around behaviors and mindset. Take a look at the “value words” organizations espouse: they tend to fall into a small, predictable, and fairly generic range – integrity, honesty, respect, customer-centricity, team orientation, creativity and so on.

The Cold Gray Light of Dawn

Duke Corporate Education (Duke CE) was no exception when it first tried to articulate its values. The list included words and phrases like Creative, Community-Oriented, Aspirational, Profitable and Client-Focused.

As a newcomer to the executive education industry, Duke CE was taking on strong brands (especially business schools whose reputation was derived from daytime MBA programs), so it needed to turn what might have been weaknesses into strengths. Because it was young, it could be daring, both in terms of learning methods and geographic reach; hence the mission-critical importance of creativity. Because it was risky, building a unique sense of fellowship was instantly critical to attracting and retaining employees; hence the need for community orientation. We could go on, but you see the point: for all the thought that had gone into this unobjectionable list, Duke CE’s values could have applied to any number of upstart businesses in a dozen industries beyond education.

So the basic tenet of human values—that a combination of values exemplifies a distinctive character—usually fails to transfer to the level of the organization. Simply put, the list of values espoused by many organizations suggests they are staffed by clones—even when nothing could be further from the truth.

True Believers

Organizational values do not have to be boring, irrelevant, or hypocritical. A more mature Duke CE engendered an innovative approach that galvanized the attention of employees, expanding the company’s early work on values into short phrases that represent real behavioral guidelines:

- Be a Steward of Value
- Anything is Possible
- Assume Positive Intent
- Melt Boundaries
- Make Others Great

These phrases emerged from a grassroots process launched by a self-empowered virtual team and were disseminated through a company-wide meeting. They reflect both current reality and aspiration for a company that was quickly expanding its ranks. At the company’s best, the values make a distinctive statement not just about how the company works but about what it thinks really matters.

Of course, these statements demand amplification, unpacking, and interpretation, and they receive it. The values are dynamic: discussion around them continues, and understanding and applications continue to evolve. Each new employee can interpret how these apply, or amplify them in a new way.