# Articulating Your Organization's Values

Have you ever noticed that what is considered normal in one culture is very different from what is acceptable elsewhere? Cultural variations are especially evident to people who travel extensively.

Organizations have different cultures, too. Every organization develops its own personality. It's rarely a conscious process. An organization's culture usually just evolves over time. The convictions of the individuals who guide and execute the operations establish what is acceptable behavior.

Imagine how outsiders coming into your organization for the first time might describe the way people interact. What would they conclude is important in the way people are treated? How would they describe the way decisions are made? What might they observe as the informally accepted rules for making things happen within your organization?

The answers to these questions would constitute the "values" of your organization. Every organization has values, but few have taken the time to describe what they are.

Two specific groups of individuals are especially sensitive to your organization's values. The first is new employees who join your team. To fit into their new environment, they pay close attention to how people act. Assuming that the behaviors are not outside what is acceptable to them, they adjust their actions so that they don't stand out from everyone else.

The new team member requires several months to "learn the ropes" and find what is acceptable in the culture. Sometimes, due to not knowing what is allowable, the recruit may make an embarrassing mistake. Wouldn't it be better to avoid such an uncomfortable situation? If the organization's values were printed in an orientation manual, new employees could read what is desirable in complying with everyone's expectations.

A second group of individuals who are sensitive to your organization's values are your customers. Many organizations now post their values on their websites, so that customers will know what to expect when they interact with company representatives. Also, if the values are especially honorable and lend themselves to servicing the customers, they become part of the broad marketing and branding of the organization.

Are your organization's values articulated anywhere? If not, consider allocating some time to make that happen. It could be a terrific teambuilding effort for the members of your organization.

You should expect that as soon as a set of value statements is generated, employees will start asking, "What about in this situation?" They want to understand how they would comply if they had to make a hard choice.

A follow-up step, then, in articulating values is to identify behaviors that typify those values. It may help as a contrast to identify behaviors that are in conflict with the intention of the value statements. These very practical guidelines provide boundaries for employees to evaluate their behaviors, and they'll have greater awareness regarding how they are expected to act.

Usually, you would not choose to share these behavioral examples publicly. You would not post them on your website, for example. However, they might be included in an employee manual, so that individuals would have easy access when faced with a difficult situation.

Articulating your organization's values will take time away from the day-to-day requirements of your operations. However, improving your organization will occur only when you take time to work "on" your systems. Working only "in" your systems never affords you the perspective that you need to make improvement!

One final thing: if you've not critically evaluated your organization's values recently, you might consider doing so. If what occurs in reality is significantly different from your expressed values, you are condoning a dangerously hypocritical situation.

Perhaps your culture has strayed from the articulated values. Or perhaps the values, when first described, were an articulation of the intent of the authors, but that vision never developed.

Even if your values are consistent with daily behaviors, you might discover enhancements that you'd like to make. After all, if your organization has consistently been moving in the direction of greater excellence, you'll want your expressed values to keep pace.

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