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How to Create Shared Values so You Can Make Your Customers and Employees Happier

This week, I'm rerunning an article that was extremely popular, long before many of you subscribed to *Traveling Light*. The message in this article is so important in this era of cynicism that everyone needs to see it, and for those who've seen it once, it's worth reading twice.

The scenario is this: you've been tapped to lead the *Our Corporate Values* project. How bogus. You dread it.

Nothing holds less appeal for the typical leader than being assigned a vague internal project which feels more like putting your hand in a bowl of Jell-O than building a successful, thriving business. Short of failed mergers and acquisitions, there are few projects which so consistently waste time and breed cynicism in organizations today. No wonder you don't want to touch it with a 10-foot pole.

Still, you can turn this seeming dog of a project into a meaningful and pragmatic contribution (and do your career no harm, either) by following a few challenging, but ultimately simple, guidelines.

Before all else: get crystal clear on the business purpose of the project. Answer the question, "Why?"

Be prepared to introduce and completely guide the discussion. Amazingly, even the senior-most sponsors may not have really thought this through, in stark contrast to the thorough (and, of course, undeserved) whipping they gave your last budget proposal.

Why does this shared values project exist? What prompted the CEO's decision to inculcate a set of shared values throughout the organization? How will the business be improved if this project is a success? Is this value substantial enough to warrant our time and attention? What would happen to the business if you did nothing? What will happen to the business if you don't do this well or if you let it stall and lose momentum? Is this the right thing to do, or would we get greater value by focusing on something else?

Some common business reasons for creating shared values are:

- building a strong, clear brand with customers and prospective customers (essential in a service business where your people are your brand)
- building a strong, clear brand with current and prospective employees (the current buzz-phrase is "becoming the employer of choice")

- providing a roadmap for individual growth of each employee
- providing an ethical compass
- getting everyone on the same page with regard to key values and behaviors, which are important aspects of building or sustaining a particular organizational culture

On the other hand, if you really just want this assignment to go away, there's no faster way to kill it than to move forward without a business case. Unfortunately, you'll have to live with the political and career consequences of ruining the CEO's pet project. Darn it.

Second: set up a process that will integrate these shared values with the organization you really have, not the ideal organization you wish you had. Guiding values and other similar projects are already at risk of being encumbered by excessive idealism. Their only hope for success is to connect them to the sometimes messy, uneven reality of the living, breathing creature known as your company.

There are six keys to a successful culture change, all of which are necessary to make it real and keep it from becoming yet another dusty plaque on the wall that gets tossed in the trash the next time you move your office. If you want yours to be successful, make sure all six are in place in your planning and execution:

- Start with the customers' needs and wants
- Directly support the unique business, its needs, and its strategy
- Translate the values into actions that can routinely be observed, measured, and evaluated
- Engage and involve the employees, including seeking out their criticisms
- Integrate the values into systems that impact the employee, such as recruiting, hiring, career/leadership development, compensation, and performance management
- Have a committed executive sponsor (or sponsors), not just the HR VP

Likewise, look at the opposite end of the spectrum and you will see the factors that drive the downfall of these initiatives every time. Failed culture change initiatives were any or all of the following:

- Based on a philosophical discussion or are a knee-jerk reaction to an unpleasant development
- A copy of something that worked elsewhere
- Too abstract to act on
- Created and implemented entirely from the top
- Living all alone in a document or on a plaque
- An HR-sponsored initiative only

Set yourself and your team up for success by setting up the project right and closely monitoring these six attributes to keep it on track. Organizations held together by shared values, not just business success, make for happier employees and happier employees make for happier customers.

Upcoming Events

Do you live in the Portland area? If so, mark your calendar for the morning of October 11. I'll be speaking on the impact of your psychological Type and gender on your financial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

I became interested in the subject after noticing different patterns between my male and female clients, even when they had achieved equal levels of financial and career success. I went in search of studies that explained why, but there weren't any, so I did one myself.

What I learned was so important that I share it whenever and wherever I can.

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Jennifer Selby Long
Selby Group