

Unlimited Potential

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Newsletter

Leading with Values: Walking the Talk

“Organizations have to have values. But so do people. To be effective in an organization, one’s own values must be compatible with the organization’s values. They do not need to be the same. But they must be close enough so that they can coexist.” – Peter Drucker, Management Challenges for the 21st Century (1999)

“Aligning values, strategies, and management practices may be simple to understand and simple to talk about, but it is very difficult to actually implement.” – Charles A. O’Reilly & Jeffrey Pfeffer, Hidden Values (2000)

All organizations have a mission statement and a set of values or guiding principles. They include such items as Integrity, Customer Service, Quality, Respect, High Performance, Teamwork, Leadership, and Innovation. Often these words are prominently displayed on plaques, posters, banners, laminated cards, and even screen savers.

But when values are ignored and people don’t live by them, they have no meaning. Worse, the business culture becomes hypocritical, and employees lose respect for the organization and its leaders. It is one more reason people disengage from their work.

When values are put into action, however, people feel energy, enthusiasm, and the drive to go beyond the mediocre. When people connect to company values that resonate with their own personal beliefs, they have even more commitment, higher productivity, and better engagement with customers. The end results show up on the bottom line.

Leaders have to take personal responsibility for their organization’s values and for making sure their people share in a common set of principles. This is not an easy task. It is one thing to agree with lofty words and ideals; it is quite another to translate ideals into action. A leader is accountable for ensuring that people not only know the values, but also put them into practice.

“We judge ourselves by our intentions. The rest of the world judges us by our actions.” – Eric Harvey



**HERDLINGER
ASSOCIATES**

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P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522
912.634.9300
877.626.2960
(toll free)
potential@Herdlinger.com

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Strategies for Leading with Values in Action

How does a leader put values into action? What questions does a leader need to ask himself or herself to clarify what is needed to lead by, with, and through values? Here are six common sense leadership strategies to consider, adapted from the book *Leading with Values* by Bud Bilanich (2004):

1. Know your values: Develop a personal understanding of your organization's values. Think about what the company's values really mean to you and to your unique leadership style. You need to know which of your behaviors demonstrate those values.

If the business' beliefs and principles don't have meaning for you, you won't be able to make them meaningful for anyone else. You must examine your own personal set of values and see how they mesh with the organization's. In some cases they won't. Very few people see their own personal set of values in terms of things like customer service or teamwork. However, the personal value of respecting others does fit in with these organizational values.

It is critical to make sure that shared values translate into behaved values. Study your organization's values and determine how they apply to you and to the people you lead. Make sure that organizational and personal values are in sync with one another.

2. Walk your talk: Show people what the organizational values mean through your behaviors. People learn by observing their leaders. You must walk your talk. Bringing values to life is a behavioral issue. You are a role model for your people. Your values show up in four behaviors:

- a. How you spend your time
- b. Where you go
- c. What you say
- d. How you deal with problems and crises

Actions speak louder than words, and employees aren't dumb. Most of your employees will follow your lead. Now, you can't be perfect all of the time, and everyone has lapses. Make sure you admit aloud whenever you find yourself off track and in breach of values. When problems or crises catch you off balance, your immediate reaction might be contrary to your personal or organizational values system. But you can slow down, and ask yourself, "What guidance do our values provide for handling this situation?" You can make course corrections to

demonstrate that you are concerned with doing the right thing in accordance with values.

Here are some important keys for walking your talk:

- Spend your time in a way that reflects your organization's values.
- Get out of your office and interact with the people who work with you and for you.
- Watch what you say...or don't say.
- When things get hot, slow down, stay calm, and use values as your guide.

3. Teach values to your people: You have to make it very clear that you expect your people to live by your organization's values. You have to sell them on the importance of living the values; more than that, you have to teach them. One of the most effective ways to teach values is through asking questions. When you ask people what they value, and which organizational value they use most frequently, you are pointing them in the right direction. Asking questions helps people learn how to apply critical thinking skills on their own. It also helps people articulate what they already know.

4. Remove obstacles to working with values: Your most important job as a leader is to help your people succeed. You must smooth the way for them because there are always obstacles and barriers to values-driven performance. You must identify roadblocks, eliminate or minimize them, or show team members how to deal with those that can't be removed.

5. Reward and recognize those who live the values: Most leaders know that effective feedback must be specific and timely. It's not effective to tell someone that he or she is "doing a great job and working with the values of the company." What does that mean? How can people do more of it, if they aren't sure what you mean? Instead, effective leaders say something like, "I saw you go out of your way to help so-and-so yesterday in order to avert a problem. That's a great example of our organizational value of teamwork (or customer service, or other value) in action. I appreciate what you did."

People crave recognition. According to the Gallup Organization, 65 percent of U.S. workers reported that they received no recognition in the workplace last year. The number one reason people leave their jobs is that they don't feel appreciated. Smart leaders actively search out opportunities to catch people doing something right and thank them for doing it. Recognizing and rewarding behavior that's in line

with values is the single best way to ensure that it continues.

6. Redirect those who aren't working with

values: This is where the rubber meets the road and where you earn your money as a leader. You must hold people accountable when they are not living the values.

There will always be a few who don't want to get with the program, and you must be the one to deal with this problem or everyone suffers. You will lose credibility and respect of others, and the work group as a whole will suffer.

Explore with people the reasons they are doing what they are doing and why they choose not to live the values. Consider these reasons:

- a. They don't know why the values are important.
- b. They don't know what they should be doing to live/work with the values.
- c. They think values are for other people, not them.
- d. They don't get rewarded for living the values.
- e. Nothing happens when they don't live the values.
- f. Quite simply, they don't like the values and refuse them.

As a leader, this presents the challenging opportunity to engage them in some meaningful dialogue about what is important to them, how their personal values can align with the organization's, and how their personal behavior is in conflict with organizational values.

The hard part is when disciplinary action is in order. Similar to giving positive feedback, be specific and timely about what behaviors need to change.

The key to attempting to change anyone's behavior is respect. You must show that you respect the employee as a person while asking for conflicting behaviors to change.

Redirecting people who are not living the values is one of the most important things a leader must do. To do so is to ensure your credibility and to reinforce the importance of values.

Focus, Attention, and Persistence

As a leader, you must never lose focus on values. There is always a value present whatever the situation, even when it is buried under detail work, financial data, or other seemingly ordinary tasks. Look for the value.

Point it out and remind people how their work is an important expression of values in action. It is your job as a leader to constantly teach, recognize, reward, and help employees make course corrections where necessary.

Every member of your workforce is responsible for values-driven business practices, but they look to you, the leader, for living examples of how the values translate into action. You set the tone.

When you take a cavalier approach to values or lose sight of them—even if temporarily—you give your team members permission to do the same.

When you refuse to give in to pressures and obstacles and remind everyone of the important values at stake, your people will have an excellent model to follow.

The greatest challenges leaders in top positions face are ethical dilemmas—for example, questions of choosing between long-term and short-term gains. It is often a problem of choosing between right and right.

There are no easy answers to some business problems. Using values will help you to be clear and decisive.

Why Values Are Important to Organizations and to People

Successful companies that consistently report growth and profits have three best practices in common, according to Charles A. O'Reilly, III, and Jeffrey Pfeffer in their book *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People* (HBSP 2000):

1. They have a clear, well-articulated set of values that are widely shared and act as the foundation for management practices.
2. They have a remarkable degree of alignment and consistency in the people-centered practices that express their core values.
3. Their senior managers are leaders whose primary role is to ensure that the values are maintained and constantly made real to all of the people who work in the organization. (p. 232)

For a person to succeed in any organization, he or she has to understand what is really important to the firm—its values. People do this by looking carefully at what's actually rewarded, observing how people get ahead and who gets promoted, and watching and listening to what senior managers do and where they spend their time. Policies and practices of the company signal clearly what is valued and important. Unfortunately, too often what senior managers say and what they do are ambiguous at best and contradictory at worst.

Why are values so important? Although none of us would work for less money than we feel is fair, money by itself isn't sufficient for motivating long-term high performance. Most of us would like to believe that what we are doing makes a difference to others and that our work is important. People cannot be motivated when they feel that what they are asked to do is worthless or contrary to their fundamental values. Moreover, most of us also want to feel that we are valued as people, not just as workers. We want to be respected for who we are, not simply for what we do. We also respond positively to being around others who share similar beliefs and with whom we can build relationships.

Herdlinger Associates

P.O. Box 20389

St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522