

# Values-Based Leadership

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**L**oyalty, Integrity, Honesty... no doubt most leaders subscribe to these core values. No doubt too that any organization with a list of core values also has these words, or similar words and phrases, to describe what it is the people within the organization believe is important. Finally, there is little doubt as well that we all know what these words mean.

But the question remains, how do these words, and similar such core values, relate to our day-to-day leadership actions? How do core values shape leadership? What does it mean when someone says "I'm a values-based leader"?

The purpose of core values is to provide the employees of the organization the "how" of their work. Just as the mission statement provides the "what" and the vision statement articulates the "why," the organizational values give direction regarding the "how." This "how" relates to the day-to-day decisions and actions that all employees do every day. Values relate to customer service, both internally and externally. Values should guide leader decision-making in that options that run contrary to the core values are not considered. Values are used to assist with the so-called "ethical dilemmas" that leaders sometime face. The resolution of an ethical dilemma should be the option that best supports or is grounded within the core values of the leader and the organization. Values serve as the foundation of any organization and without this solid foundation, organizations often fail. One need only look at the corporate scandals to see how the failure to follow and exemplify core values can lead to catastrophic results.

Most agencies and businesses have a list of core values or a values-based statement. Values are usually found in the employee handbook and sometimes the values are included in some corporate-level display along with the mission and vision statements. New employee orientation typically includes a review of the organization's mission, vision and values, but beyond that, the values are seldom discussed openly, unless there is a period of crisis or after a leadership refresher-training course when values are mentioned.

Ask employees what the stated values of the organization are and most will stumble through their answer. They might

recall their orientation program or perhaps a retreat where values were discussed, but most employees usually cannot clearly articulate the core values of the organization.

Perhaps the more important question leaders should pose to their employees is not "What are the stated core values?" but rather "What do you believe the leaders and employees within this organization value?" Unless core values are widely discussed, made relevant and, most importantly, the values are exemplified by all employees (particularly by leaders), these core values are largely immaterial. After all, it is how people act and respond that matters, not just what is written on some poster on a wall or in a handbook.

Good leaders want to believe that they exemplify the core values of the organization and that they are values-based leaders. Good leaders want every employee to know, understand and exemplify the core values. Good leaders understand that values guide ethical conduct in the workplace and that values exemplification usually means better customer service, higher quality services and products, and greater efficiency and effectiveness. Quite simply, values-based leadership is walking the talk, but how do you truly walk the talk, individually and organizationally?

Such is the challenge that I faced a few years ago: how to obtain a values-based culture within the organization and instill a values-based leadership approach from the first-line supervisors through the most senior leaders and within the executive team. My approach? Tell the values story!

As I assumed command of the Wyoming Army National Guard (my other "day job") in January 2006, my most important goal was to create a values-based leadership approach. The Army has stated and clearly-defined core values: Loyalty, Duty, Honor, Selfless Service, Integrity, Personal Courage and Respect. My challenge was to give meaning to these words so that all soldiers, not just the leaders, understood and, most importantly, exemplified these values.

A technique that I found successful was to take one of the values each month (rotated throughout the year) and have each of the senior commanders tell me a story of where they saw this value exemplified in the past month. I did not want to discuss theory (the "should do"), but instead, wanted to focus on application (the "actually do"). My challenge to

the leadership team was to give me a specific example of when he or she saw a soldier "do" the value that was featured for the particular month.

Naturally, the first few months of briefings were a little rough in terms of how these stories were found and presented. However, once we developed collective competency regarding what our values mean, finding examples of the values in action became easier. See a soldier stay late and work on an important task—that's selfless service. See a soldier choose the harder right over the easier wrong—that's integrity. See a soldier volunteer for a difficult assignment—that's personal courage.

Quite subtly, these five-to-ten-minute values discussions during our monthly senior leader meetings changed the culture of our organization. Senior commanders required similar values-based discussions with their subordinate commanders during command update briefs. First-line supervisors were now openly discussing the meaning of our values with new enlistees. Hallway posters shared the top values-based stories with other employees. Values were brought into the discussion, openly and candidly, during our deliberate decision-making process. Even our awards program was subtly shaped to be values-based rather than task-oriented.

Back now to my role as a facilitator with my company and trying to teach values-based leadership. During the course of our leadership seminars and workshops, I ask participants to tell their stories of values in action. A simple technique that we have found effective is to build a T-chart. List the value (and its definition) across the top. On the left-hand side, describe what this value "sounds like." On the right-hand side, list what this value "looks like." The "sounds like" is the talk; the "looks like" is the walk. Once a connection is made, workshop participants can readily tell their story of where they saw this value exemplified. Sharing these stories is an effective technique to give meaning to what is often thought of as abstract. Sharing the values stories beyond the classroom (and the boardroom) will generate values-based synergy throughout the organization.

There are many techniques that you can employ to create a values-centric organization. Here are a few suggestions:

- Take one value a month and discuss both the definition of the value and its application in the workplace. Do this at the start of every staff or team meeting.
- Require your team to share their stories of where they saw your core values exemplified by others in the workplace. Be specific with this one. The greater the specificity, the more meaning, and relevance, generated.
- If you have an employee recognition program (e.g., employee of the month, quarter, year, etc.), shape the recognition around your core values. Couch what the employee did for the recognition in the context of your values. Openly state that what the employee did was to exemplify a value through their actions in the workplace.
- Incorporate your core values into the decision-making process. As the leader of the process, ask the question of your team: "Is what we are deciding or recommending faithful to our core values?" Build this values check into your deliberate planning and decision-making process.
- Hold employees accountable to the values of the organization. If you see something that is not right, act! Frame the discussion around your values (this is not just what "I" believe, but rather it is what "we" believe).

Nearly everyone agrees that the organizational values should be the "how" for both decision-making and leadership. Turning the abstract into the practical is clearly a leadership challenge. If you start looking for your values through the day-to-day activities of your employees, there is no doubt that you will find them. As you look, you too will be transformed into a values-based leader.

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