6 Ways to Bring Organizational Values to Life by Jane MItchell

How many organizations do you have personal experience of or that you have seen in the headlines with stories of cultural failure, leadership blindness, unethical behaviour, terrible decision-making? It's unlikely to be none and even in a few seconds is more likely to be somewhere between five and ten.

Let's take VW, WellsFargo, Uber, Exxon, Fox News, United Airlines, The Weinstein Company, Walmart, HSBC, Lehman Brothers, Barclays Bank, Adidas, Samsung, and in the past few weeks and days here in the UK, Carillion, ToysRUs and Maplin? The world is seemingly now littered with companies who have experienced ethical failures, There is a whole host of reasons for these dreadful situations but these are salutary examples and worth remembering as we consider whether there is any value to values, and the impact of these failures on industries, communities, customers, suppliers, employees – and more.

The majority of those companies, with one exception as far as I could tell, do or did have Codes of Conduct, Ethics policies and Values that are and were woven through a myriad of communications. Values in particular are often proudly proclaimed by organizations as if somehow they add credibility to their activities. The fact is though, and as the companies we have in our minds will attest, they don't qualify you for immunity against ethical and corporate failures and are useless as a get out of jail free card. In fact, quite the opposite. Today 'stated' values are heavily scrutinized and tested by people as they make supplier and employer choices, develop business partnerships, engage as employees, and so on. Flowery and fluffy intentions (the touch feely stuff) are simply not acceptable any more. If you *say* it, then you will be challenged to *do* it.

As communicators we know that the world is increasingly connected, that everyone and anyone feels free to communicate anything and everything. Organizations have for a long time had little control over their corporate messaging, and the social media revolution has made all of this possible. That is old news but it is fundamental when thinking about how your own organization might *credibly* communicate its values.

There are hundreds of thousands of papers, articles, blogs and opinions written, from the highly academic to the esoteric and the prosaic. All tackle the question of "What is the value of values? Having worked with a number of organisations that have grappled with this very question, I think that it boils down to something essentially human. If anyone in an organization can believe in its values, can relate to them and understand what they mean for individual (and corporate) behaviours, these are values at work. The Values live and breathe in a

way that everyone knows what it means to be a part of and to do business with the organization. Expectations are set and delivered.

The trick, however, is getting that to happen. It sounds relatively simple and certainly many organizations, as we've said, do profess to be values-led. But how many really are, and what is it that makes them stand out?

One of my personal favourites is <u>South West Airlines</u>, a *positive* poster child and example of a company that has values at the heart of its ethos and which is dedicated *" to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit."* The six company values including Servant's Heart and Safety and Reliability, speak to that mission and in my experience, they deliver.

From a Country and Western-themed safety briefing, to a collective sense of fun, helpful and communicative dispositions of all staff, punctual, clean and comfortable aircraft, great communication on the ground, in the air and online and an infectious sense of pride. I am enthused by a group of people who genuinely love their work and the company that they show up for on a daily basis.

This personal experience, and you will have your own, shows me a company with Values at its heart. A 'Values Launch Campaign' , however, does not mean that those values magically become imbued into everything that you do. It certainly may be a captivating way to start, but all that glistens is rarely gold and the tarnish can soon set in.   The hard work begins afterwards and the companies that in my experience are doing this well, are those that are thinking long term and well beyond just a great communications campaign. When positive values become integral to an organisation's culture, they do correlate with sustainable success, and although what follows is not an exhaustive check list, it may provide some useful stimulus as you consider how well your own organisation is doing, and what more you may be able to do.

Leadership buy-in and advocacy is the number one priority. Are your leaders talking and walking the values? Work toward closing any gaps between communication rhetoric and behavioural reality. That is crucial. If your leaders have to be bought dragging and kicking to the values conversation – change jobs! Herb Kelleher the SouthWest CEO who triggered the focus on values remained an exemplar until the day he retired.

Employee engagement means precisely that - engage your employees. If you're starting out or reviewing and refreshing your values, involve your employees in the discussion. Size doesn't matter. In fact, the more communication channels you have at your disposal the more excitement you can generate.

Encourage on-going conversation and individual ownership. Use your expertise to develop collateral for your various audiences; interactive materials and channels - print and online, leadership and staff workshops, transformation programmes, internal and external campaigns, and at the same time embed the

values into other priority messages and activities. Creating opportunities for open and healthy dialogue encourages 'values at work' and sends a crystal clear message that your organisation means what it says. This includes of course, providing access to independent speak up lines that offer guidance, advice and a way of reporting ethical violations.

Embed values into infrastructure and governance. This includes management systems, governance, recruitment, performance and reward, target setting and so on. This is long-term activity but vital if your organisation's apparent commitment to values is to be taken seriously. This may not be your direct remit but as someone who will be communicating the Values messages you need to know that they are consistent and authentic.

Have the courage to make tough decisions and communicate them. Customers, partners and employees alike value that maturity. Values become meaningful when they play a part in decision-making, and that includes big corporate decisions to individual day to day decisions. It's also vital to communicate those decisions particularly when they have a big impact and when they concern unethical behaviour.   There is no reason, legal or otherwise, for not proactively communicating outcomes of decisions, and every reason to do so to reinforce your values credentials.

And finally... communicators have the most significant role as connector of dots in organisations. As an integral part of a network you guide and support every other critical group such as Ethics and Compliance, Legal, HR, Operations and senior leaders to keep colleagues aligned, values messages consistent, stories authentic. Make no mistake, communications teams are at the heart of effectively embedding values in every organisation.

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