LEADING INSIGHTS

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Communicate What You Most Care About

Your managerial values are your cultural blueprint

Tim Stevenson

A DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR in a medical company asked me to visit and give her a coaching checkup. Janet's superior had suggested it, and I was happy to see what I could do. I was meeting her for the first time.

Janet seemed friendly and personable. We sat down in her office and she talked about her situation. She led a staff of 15 serving the company's physicians. Janet seemed quite knowledgeable about the technical parts of her job, and her staff sounded competent in regard to their work.

On many levels they were doing well, but Janet was dissatisfied. "We can do a lot better at customer service," she said. "Our doctors aren't completely happy with my staff. They aren't as responsive as they should be, and they don't take initiative very well. The physicians feel sometimes that they don't really care. I'm frustrated and don't know what to do."

> *"You don't just 'choose' values because they sound good. You got to <u>believe</u> them!"*

Rather than comment on those things, I asked her a question. "What are your managerial values?" Janet sat still for several seconds. Thinking she needed clarification, I followed up. "What I mean is this: If I go out there and ask your staff this question — 'What does Janet most care about?' — what will they tell me?"

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"I don't know," she finally said.

"Then you can be sure *they* don't know either," I replied, "except perhaps for values you *don't know* you are communicating."

We went on to have a discussion about what managerial values are, and I left Janet with the assignment of formulating hers.

Values shape cultures

Why is this so important? It's because values shape a group's culture, and culture shapes behavior and performance. All groups have a culture. It's not *if*, it's *what kind?* A group's culture can be positive or negative, healthy or unhealthy, a help or a hindrance. A culture can be built intelligently by design according to specific values, like a building that is shaped according to a blueprint. Or it can be formed accidentally like a sand dune, according to the prevailing winds. In the latter case, the "prevailing wind" in a group of people typically means the current mood of its dominant personality, who may or may not be the one with formal authority.

Thus, if you are a leader and do not embrace the task of deliberate culture formation, you are playing dice with your team's development. There's no predicting what you'll get.

Deadly inadvertent values

As I warned Janet, every leader *is* communicating her or his values through words and behavior, even if they don't know it. And be sure of this: Values you don't know you are communicating are more likely to be ones you don't want!

As examples, all across the world of business, leaders are communicating values like these:

- "Don't bother me. I'm too busy."

- "Customers are an inconvenience."

- "Most people are dishonest and trying to cheat the system."

- "Employees who ask questions or need help are stupid and incompetent."

- "It is acceptable to maintain a negative attitude."

- "If you bring me bad news you'll be punished, regardless of whose fault it is."

- "I'll cave and let you have your way if you whine a lot."

- "I'm in this for myself. You are only props in my story."

- "The way to get ahead around here is by kissing up to me."

Kind of takes your breath away, doesn't it? You may think that these are especially negative examples, but they are not far from reality in many places. I'll bet that if you've worked over several years with a number of bosses, you've seen at least a couple of these.

The most important point, though, is to consider: What kind of local culture would result where a manager communicates any of these attitudes? It doesn't take much imagination to work out the implications.

There is a better way than leaving culture to chance! It's by deliberately building one based on positive values you choose.

Example of managerial values

To help clarify what I'm talking about, I'll share mine. Though I don't presently manage a staff, I did for around 20 years of my career. Here are my own managerial values:

1. **Positive attitude**
2. **Servant's spirit**
3. **Teamwork**

I'm extremely flexible about many things. Goals, strategies, and organizational structures come and go. A lot of work in the real world consists of experimentation, trial and error. I also tend to be pretty tolerant of human limitations and weaknesses. But, as anyone who worked for me will tell you, I am *not tolerant of deviations from core values*.

An honest mistake — that's forgivable. Let's figure out what went wrong, learn from it, and correct it. But you can expect me to be pretty stern, at the least, if you violate a core value. Here is how I would explain them.

Positive attitude ─ I *expect* people to maintain a positive attitude. Yes, we all have days when we're not at our best, but an ongoing negative attitude is not OK.

Servant spirit ─ We existed to serve the public (non-profit public service organizations). It is a serious breach of attitude to treat a member of the public as an inconvenience. We are here not to be served, but to serve.

Teamwork ─ None of us can do this alone. We need each other and rely on each other to fulfill our mission. It is unacceptable to violate the value of teamwork through operating as if you were are free agent and do not need to cooperate with the others.

These are *my* values. I do not suggest that you adopt them as yours, though you are welcome to do so. What I'd like you to see is they are *specific*, *clear*, and *consistent*. Given an opportunity, I could speak for hours explaining what they mean and why they're important. These are the values I would have told you 20 years ago, and they are the same ones I will talk about 20 years from now.

Identifying your managerial values

"Identifying" is a key word. You don't just "choose" values because they sound good. **You've got to *believe* them!** They must come from the heart, or you will never have the tenacity to stick with them week after week, month after month, year after year. That's why you have to look deep inside and find out what values you actually believe *already*.

I know leaders whose values are built around performance: Accuracy, Perfection, Punctuality, Delivery, Service, Innovation. Others emphasize behavioral qualities: Initiative, Tenacity, Resourcefulness, Energy. Some choose from interpersonal behaviors: Cooperation, Harmony, Consideration, Manners, Respect. Of course, you could mix and match from the different categories, too.

After identifying what you most believe in, it's important to boil them down to three or, at most, four values. Beyond four is too many. They must be easily remembered to the point that they become second nature to your team.

Then comes the never-ending process of communicating and aligning behaviors to your values. You have to live up to them yourself, of course, or they fall flat. But if you stick with it, you'll see the development of a positive values-based culture. Then you have the platform for genuine achievement and team performance.

Janet, by the way, did work up her managerial values and began teaching them to her team. Months later, she happily described the progress they were making. **L**ⁱ