

Warning! Values May Be Detrimental to Your Organization's Health

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Do your employees complain of favoritism or inconsistency in decision-making or lack of fairness? If so, the problem - and the solution - may be your organization's values.

On its face, the practice of identifying values to guide workplace behaviors and decisions seems reasonable, productive, and highly desirable. Yet such values may, in fact, be detrimental to the organization's health. In fact, I contend that unless managers go beyond merely identifying organizational values, unintended negative outcomes are likely to occur in workplaces in which employers have articulated values.

The fact that values are subjective is the reason they may be detrimental to organizational health. Let's take integrity as an example of an organizational value. Each of us has a "picture" of what integrity looks like. That picture varies from person to person - and in fact, often is very fuzzy. We tend to think, "I'll know integrity when I see it." That's not good enough: when the pictures vary, so do the judgments of who is acting with integrity and who is not.

You and I could argue all day about whether someone has acted with - or without - integrity without reaching agreement because we're arguing about a subjective concept. In order for us to resolve this argument, we have to agree on specific behaviors that demonstrate "integrity" so we have a more objective way of assessing the extent to which employees' behaviors and decisions reflect this value.

There are very real costs to the organization when employees perceive a disparity between stated values and actual behaviors. For example, employees might perceive inconsistency, favoritism, and unfairness, and they may experience feelings such as disillusionment, anger, betrayal, disappointment, confusion, and distrust. Articulating values sets the expectation that managers' behaviors and decisions will reflect those values. What if this can't happen because employees and managers define values differently? In addition to the above negative outcomes, we can expect low morale, decreased trust in management, and increased cynicism.

We can maximize the likelihood that employees' expectations will be met by identifying behaviors that indicate people are acting with integrity, having conversations around those behaviors, and distinguishing clearly between desirable and undesirable behaviors. For example, I would characterize people as acting with integrity when they engage in the following behavior:

- Do what they say they'll do.
- Tell the truth.
- Make decisions based on stated criteria (e.g., staffing, promotions).
- Hold themselves accountable for their behaviors.

- Hold others accountable for their (others') behaviors.
- Admit their mistakes and take responsibility for them.
- Give reasons for the decisions they make so others understand their thought processes or logic.

Once we have identified and communicated the behaviors represented by the value of integrity, we can have a productive conversation. NOW we're getting somewhere!

Here are nine steps to ensure that your organization's values are not detrimental to its health:

1. Identify a few values that support the strategic goals and define them at the organization level.
2. Have managers and employees collaborate on operationalizing those values - i.e., identify specific behaviors that demonstrate each value. Note: Examples of specific behaviors may change at different levels. All behaviors should be consistent with the organization's definition of each value so there is alignment up and down the organization.
3. Communicate the behaviors through multiple media.
4. Incorporate the values and their respective behaviors into the performance management process - for managers as well as for employees. State what behaviors you WANT, rather than those you **don't** want.
5. Ensure all systems support the values and do not punish desired behaviors (e.g., when teamwork is a value, rewards are based on team behaviors rather than on individual behaviors).
6. Provide training as necessary (e.g., how to identify relevant behaviors, how to evaluate behaviors, how to give and receive constructive feedback).

7. Reward/recognize people whose behaviors demonstrate the values.
8. Take corrective action when behaviors violate the values.
9. Ensure that managers consistently model the desired behaviors.

What percent of your employees can identify your organization's values? How many of those individuals can tell you what each value means in his/her job? Unless you are able to answer nearly 100%, you may want to consider taking the above steps to improve the health of **your** organization! ➔

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