Living Your Values
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One of the greatest dangers to the reputation, even the survival, of any organization is for there to be a gap between the values posted on the lobby wall and the attitudes and behaviors that are actually reflected in workplace culture. This article discusses why an authentic and meaningful statement of values is essential for being considered a highly reliable organization that is also recognized as being a great place to work. It then shares 10 practical strategies for more effectively defining and promoting the core values of your organization.

“If we lose sight of our vision and bury our values, then we have lost our soul.”
—David Whyte

Last year for the first time, Fortune Magazine changed the criteria by which they select the 100 best companies to work for. My interpretation of these 6 criteria is that effective leaders: maximize human potential by helping people live their values, creating a culture where trust and innovation can flourish, resulting in financial growth. In that order. It begins with values, which are the foundation in the invisible architecture of organizational culture.

Several years ago, my 90-year-old Mom was admitted to Northeast Methodist Hospital in her home town of San Antonio. The highlight of her stay was when her nurse Arturo Rodriguez surprised her with the hot dog she’d been craving (Figure 1). In the years since, Mom has gone to that hospital for a broken hip, pneumonia, and sepsis. There was never a question of which hospital she’d choose—she’ll always go to the one where they always remember that she loves hot dogs. The one where people wear the hospital’s values on their sleeves.

VALUES AND THE KNOWING-PERFORMING GAP
As part of my research for this article, I sent a survey to people on my newsletter mailing list, most of whom are health care professionals. The results were disconcerting, but also reflect what we typically see when we administer our validated VCI-17 Culture Assessment Survey.

Although one-half of respondents strongly agreed that their organization “has a meaningful statement of values,” only 1 in 10 strongly agreed that people “know those values and strive to practice them in their work.” Only one-third strongly agreed that “managers are expected to hold people accountable for reflecting those values in their attitudes and behaviors.”

Only 2 in 10 strongly agreed that “senior leaders don’t just talk about our values, they set high expectations through their examples.”

Only 2 in 10 strongly agreed that their organization’s values “are reflected in the way difficult decisions, including those about budgets and resource allocations, are made.”

In It’s the Manager, Jim Clifton and Jim Harter explain the qualitative difference between people who answer survey questions with a 5 (strongly agree) and a 4

**KEY POINTS**
- There is often a gap between the values posted on the wall and behaviors observed in the workplace; it is a key leadership responsibility to close this gap, beginning with the example they set in their own attitudes and behaviors.
- A generic value statement does little to differentiate your organization from others that claim to hold the same values, or to inspire pride and loyalty among your people.
- This article shares 10 practical strategies for ensuring that your statement of values inspires current employees, attracts the people you want as new employees, and establishes your organization’s reputation for always practicing and being true to the values you proclaim.
Instead of passionately believing in the organization, people lose faith in their ability to triumph and prevail. Reflected in the work that your people do and in the statement of values, and that those values are reflected in the work that your people do and in the accountability of a culture of ownership where people around them. People hold themselves to higher standards and don’t need to be disciplined by the boss or chastised by colleagues in order to be held accountable.

As Christy Dempsey put it in The Antidote to Suffering: “mission, vision, and values constitute the most important information to pass on to employees, not to mention patients and visitors” (emphasis in original). But passing on values is not something that can be done in new employee orientation, they’ve given a beautiful speech about core values but then don’t see those values being lived out where the work is being done.

As Christy Dempsey put it in The Antidote to Suffering: “mission, vision, and values constitute the most important information to pass on to employees, not to mention patients and visitors” (emphasis in original). But passing on values is not something that can be done in new employee orientation, they’ve given a beautiful speech about core values but then don’t see those values being lived out where the work is being done. One reason so many people quite within the first 2 years of starting a new job is that during new employee orientation, they’ve given a beautiful speech about core values but then don’t see those values being lived out where the work is being done.

Failure to pass on values can have dire consequences. In How the Mighty Fail, Jim Collins says that an organization is on the brink of catastrophic failure when “people cannot easily articulate what the organization stands for; core values have eroded to the point of irrelevant; the organization has become ‘just another place to work,’ a place to get a paycheck; people lose faith in their ability to triumph and prevail. Instead of passionately believing in the organization’s core values and purpose, people become distrustful, regarding vision and values as a little more than PR and rhetoric.”

In the rest of this article, I describe 10 strategies for ensuring that your organization has a meaningful statement of values, and that those values are reflected in the work that your people do and in the way that they treat the people you serve and each other.

**STRATEGY #1: MOVE FROM A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY TO A CULTURE OF OWNERSHIP**

When people don’t share a common set of values, you need to have lots of rules.

—Joe Tye

No one ever checks the oil in a rental car. Especially in health care, you cannot hold people accountable for the things that really matter. Cracking the whip will not make people more empathetic, holding their feet to the fire will not make them more loyal, and no combination of carrot and stick will motivate people to be more proud of their organization. Indeed, as Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes write in The Innovation Paradox: “In the long run...accountability encourages a culture of evasion, denial, and finger pointing.”

When we talk about accountability, which is typically the “A” in an ICARE statement of values, we should understand that there are really 3 levels in the accountability continuum (Figure 2). At work, we are usually talking about hierarchical accountability. That is the accountability of boss over subordinate, of carrot and stick. The metaphors we use for hierarchical accountability include cracking the whip and holding feet to the fire—both medieval forms of torture.

Cultural accountability is far more powerful, for better and worse. At its best, cultural accountability is people holding each other to a higher standard. This is someone telling a coworker that “We don’t talk about people behind their backs because it’s dishonest, and we care about our integrity.” At its worst, cultural accountability is the way a bully or toxic clique sucks the joy out of the work and sucks the energy out of people around them.

The highest level is personal accountability. This is the accountability of a culture of ownership where people hold themselves to higher standards and don’t need to be disciplined by the boss or chastised by colleagues in order to be “held accountable.” When leaders practice personal accountability, through their examples they will promote positive values.

**STRATEGY #2: REVIEW, THEN REINFORCE OR REVISE, YOUR VALUES STATEMENT**

A great values statement, especially one that is both authentic and attractively designed, can be a valuable resource for communicating with your community. At Tucson Medical Center, their distinctive statement of values is posted throughout the hospital. Julia Strange, vice president community benefit, told me that although the primary purpose is to be a constant reminder to hospital staff, she also frequently refers to
these values in conversations with external audiences, including the media (Strange J, personal communication, February 2019).

Many health care organizations have values statements that are little more than a collection of generic platitudes, sometimes force fit into an acronym such as ICARE. There are 3 problems with such bumper sticker values. First, they do little to differentiate your organization from every other that claims similar values. Second, they set a low bar. Of course I expect integrity, compassion, respect, and excellence from my hospital. I also expect these qualities from my bank and my car dealer. Third, they are unlikely to inspire your people, many of whom don’t know them anyway, to go above and beyond the basics of their job descriptions.

Leaders should periodically pull the plaque off the wall and give it a serious review and ask whether to hold ‘em or to fold ‘em. Are those values still relevant, or is it time to make some changes? Should you replace accountability with ownership? Should your values reflect changes in the world around you—for example by including a commitment to diversity or environmental stewardship? Should you add something about being committed to the personal welfare and advancement of the people who depend upon your organization for their livelihoods?

Hold ‘Em
The Veterans Health Administration is one of many health care organizations that has adopted a statement of values with the I CARE acronym. In the case of VHA, the letters stand for Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. These are noble aspirations but can seem abstract at the frontlines. Kerri Wilhoite is associate director for patient care services at Southern Arizona VA Health Care. When she meets with her people, she shows how these overarching core values relate to individual job positions. “For example,” she told me, “to a critical care nurse, commitment means acutely monitoring each patient and responding quickly to any changes in their condition. For an environmental services aide, commitment means making sure that every surface is absolutely clean. And for both, commitment means doing everything possible to make veterans and family members know they are being cared for with genuine compassion.” (Wilhoite K, personal communication, March 2019).

Fold ‘Em
Several years ago, Values Coach engaged 2 critical access hospitals on opposite ends of the state in the Great Wyoming Values and Culture Challenge. Part of the challenge was for each hospital to replace generic values statements with ones that authentically reflected the uniqueness of their organizations and their communities. Each used a different process and came up with very different end products. The team at Memorial Hospital of Converse County in Douglas captured the blue collar seriousness of eastern Wyoming, whereas the team at Star Valley Medical Center in Afton captured the adventurous outdoorsy feel of the western side of the state (Figure 3).

STRATEGY #3: BE DELIBERATE IN SHAPING AND SHARING STORIES
One of the most powerful tools leaders have to shape culture and reinforce values is stories. In the early days of Hewlett Packard, the culture known as the HP Way was largely shaped by Bill and Dave stories. Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard knew that they couldn’t be everywhere and talk to everyone, so they used stories to create shared values and common expectations.

One Saturday morning, Bill came in to work and found that the instruments he needed were locked in a cabinet. He snipped off the padlock with a bolt cutter then posted a note saying, “We trust each other at HP—never lock this door again.” That simple story, which was told and retold across the organization, did more to promote trust than any number of policies and procedures could have.10

Health care leaders should be alert to how everyday occurrences can be molded into culture-shaping stories. When Dr. Toby Cosgrove was chief executive officer (CEO) of Cleveland Clinic, he spoke for a group of students at Harvard Business School. One student asked whether Cleveland Clinic employees were trained on empathy, then explained that when her father needed heart surgery, they chose Mayo over Cleveland Clinic. The clinical outcomes of both organizations were outstanding, she said, but people at Mayo did a much better job of making her family members feel that they would be cared for in a compassionate way.”11
In the following months, Cleveland Clinic created the first hospital chief experience officer position—a role that has since become common. They produced the now-famous Cleveland Clinic empathy video (if you can watch that without being emotionally touched, you should be in a field other than health care), and every employee completed mandatory empathy training. Dr. Cosgrove’s story was a more powerful catalyst for culture change than any comparison of clinical outcomes or patient satisfaction ever could have been. As Brene Brown puts it, stories are “data with a soul.”

12 Or in the more poetic phrasing of Philip Pullman, “Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but once upon a time lasts forever.”

STRATEGY #4: USE RITUALS TO REINFORCE CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

Rituals are among the oldest and still most powerful tools for reinforcing cultural expectations. To an outside observer, or to a toxically cynical insider, rituals are seen as a silly waste of time, but over time, they profoundly influence attitudes and behaviors, and thus, culture.

Every morning at 8:16 sharp, the entire management team, and anyone else who wants to join in, gathers in the main lobby of Midland Memorial Hospital for a 14-minute huddle. They begin by reciting the Pickle Pledge and that day’s promise from the Self Empowerment Pledge. This ritual is now in its fifth year, and many of the participants no longer need to read the words because they know them by heart.

More important, many have made significant life changes by taking them to heart. As one example, Bob Dent (who was chief nursing officer when the ritual started) wrote an article called “Promises” about an RN who, by making a commitment to those promises, was finally able to break a tenacious drug addiction—a story that was included in Chicken Soup for the Soul: Inspiration for Nurses.14 In an interview with the H&HN publication of the American Hospital Association, Bob said that reciting these promises in the daily huddle “keeps the culture of ownership front and center.”

STRATEGY #5: FORMALLY RECOGNIZE PEOPLE FOR LIVING THE VALUES

My only inpatient experience in a hospital was a 9-day stay at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) with a diagnosis of acute diverticulitis. I submitted DAISY Award nominations for 4 of my nurses, but not one was for something included in the nurse’s job description. As DAISY Foundation cofounder Bonnie Barnes told me, “The stories of how these nurses provide care is what gives life to the values that are posted on the wall or the website, and that happens because compassion is an outer reflection of their own personal values.” (Barnes B, personal communication, June 2019).
Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have marveled at the risks a man would take in hopes of earning a small swatch of colored ribbon. That facet of human nature has not changed in the 200 years since Napoleon met his Waterloo. One of the best ways to encourage your people to live their values is to liberally and generously honor them for doing so. Recognition is one thing that simply cannot be overdone.

**STRATEGY #6: UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VALUES, BEHAVIORS, AND OUTCOMES**

Many of the entries we see in a hospital statement of values are not values at all—they are behaviors and outcomes. Safety, quality, excellence, patient satisfaction, growth, and financial performance are not values—they are outcomes. Compassion, empathy, professionalism, teamwork, and civility are not values—they are behaviors. Identifying the underlying values that inspire behaviors is essential to achieving desired outcomes.

In *The Speed of Trust*, Steven M.R. Covey writes that the absence of trust is like a tax on the organization: it makes everything take longer and cost more. So although we should certainly value trust, we must also recognize that trust is not a value—it is an outcome, something to be earned. The behaviors that earn trust include honesty, transparency, reliability, consistency, concern, and stewardship. The underlying value that inspires these behaviors is integrity (Figure 4). One of the guiding insights for our work at Values Coach is that culture does not change until people change, but people will not change unless they are inspired to do so by their own sense of values. One of the most important investments any organization can make is to help people clarify, and act upon, their personal values.

**Figure 4.** The Values → Behaviors → Outcomes Continuum.

**STRATEGY #7: PUT SOME WOW INTO YOUR VALUES STATEMENT**

If your statement of values is not prominently featured on your website and in your recruiting materials, you are missing an opportunity to tell the people you most want to hire why they should work for your organization. But first, make sure that you’ve built in a WOW factor. For the best examples of this, you must look outside of health care to companies such Southwest Airlines, Clif Bar, San Francisco Bay Coffee Company, and Patagonia. Here are three of my favorite WOW values:

- Be yourself unless you’re a jerk (Integrated DNA Technologies)
- Expect greatness in yourself and inspire it in others (Clickstop)
- Create fun and a little weirdness (Zappos)

In the years to come, you won’t just be competing with other hospitals to recruit health care professionals. You will be competing with Apple, Amazon, and other organizations that have spent years trying to create a WOW sort of culture.

**STRATEGY #8: HELP PEOPLE CONNECT PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES**

Research by Kouzes and Posner, creators of The Leadership Challenge, shows that the clearer people are about their personal values, the more enthusiastically they will embrace the values of their employer. Unfortunately, most of us have not clearly defined our personal values. We do not monitor our calendars and checkbook registers, or our interactions with others, to see how well they accord with what we say our values are. The Twelve Core Action Values is our 60-module course on values-based life and leadership skills. When we prepare certified values coach trainers to teach the course, we explicitly relate those personal values to the organizational values of our client (Figure 5).

**STRATEGY #9: HELP PEOPLE CONNECT PERSONAL VALUES AND HEALTH**

Midland Health has set an audacious goal of making Midland the healthiest community in Texas. Knowing that people will not change behaviors, including health behaviors, unless guided by their personal values, they’ve made culture of ownership and the Twelve Core Action Values a central element of that campaign. They’ve partnered with Midland Independent School District so that employees and students complete the values course. Marcy Madrid is vice president for marketing and planning at Midland Health. Google her TEDxMidland speech for an inspiring example of how values can change the health of a community and of an individual.

**STRATEGY #10: WALK THE TALK WITH NO EXCEPTIONS ALLOWED**

Research conducted at the University of Iowa College of Public Health shows that the higher one’s position on the organization chart, the rosier the glasses they will wear when assessing the culture of their organizations. Whatever your position, take off the rose-colored glasses and answer these questions:
Figure 5. Michele Borey, one of the certified values coach trainers at Children’s Hospital New Orleans (CHNOLA), is shown with the banner illustrating linkages between the Twelve Core Action Values and the hospital’s CHNOLA values.

➢ Will a manager or provider get away with behaviors that would cause a housekeeper to be terminated?
➢ Will someone who is technically competent and/or hard to replace be allowed to act in ways that violate organizational values?
➢ Are the organization’s core values explicitly considered whenever difficult decisions and tough choices are being made? In hiring decisions?
➢ Has your organization defined ZTBs—zero tolerance behaviors—and are these expectations enforced, even for people who have management titles?
➢ Go to www.Culture-IQ.com and take the quick 8-question quiz. You will instantly receive a score of between 8 (the worst possible) and 24 (the best possible). What does that number say about how well the stated values of your organization are reflected in the culture of your workplace?

If you’re not happy with your answers to these questions, what are you going to do about it?

REFERENCES

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