



# Leadership Insights

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## VALUES: THE IMPORTANCE OF WALKING THE TALK

It is widely recognized that employees respond to people who value them and move away from those who decrease their self worth.

*"The scarcest resource in the world today is leadership talent capable of continuously transforming organizations to win in tomorrow's world."*

Nel Tichy, The Leadership Engine

Over the last few years I have heard many variations of the following lament:

*"Carl can be an overbearing and obnoxious character. We've tried on numerous occasions to reign in his offensive behavior but it just seems to fall on deaf ears. Otherwise, I must say he gets results and has brought in a number of big clients. He has some good contacts but the problem is that he doesn't listen to his people. It is "my way or the highway" and we have lost a couple of good people because of his attitude. He is known for generally creating animosity from those who report to him. Should we continue to work with this guy or simply let him go?"*

This recurring leadership issue has caused me to write this month about the importance of conducting yourself and your business with integrity. **Since what we tolerate has the tendency to grow, leadership ultimately predicts whether values are lived or simply espoused.**

In the last few years most companies have recognized the importance of documenting their values. Some have gone to great

lengths in detailing what would be ideal behavior but it is still the rare company who has leaders who actually walk the talk.

The quality of interactions between a manager and his/her staff is what drives the quality of the products and services. **The number one success factor for any manager is their "relationships with subordinates". Studies continue to show that the most important reason executives derail in their careers is their insensitivity and inability to understand the perspectives of others.** As Stephen Covey would say, "Good managers seek to understand rather than focusing on being understood."

Managers must recognize that their number one job function is to treat all employees with warmth, dignity and respect. As I have often said, **"Everyone has the desire to be heard and have their opinions acknowledged. It is not necessary for leaders to agree or accommodate these positions, but rather it is essential to respectfully acknowledge and hear what is being said."**

Many organizations seem to forget the connection between customers, employees, and financial results. The best companies are able to get extraordinary results because they lead with people-centered values. **Clear values come first.** Building trust comes second. A big misconception is that you create core values -- actually you discover them. You do not deduce them by looking at the external environment. You understand core values by looking inside - by discovering what is important to the organization and its people.

If a company has taken the time to outline its values, they probably consume five or six written pages. Take those pages and reduce them to four or five key elements that best define the culture you want to reinforce. Here are some ideas:

- Mutual respect
- Commitment
- Cooperation
- Listening
- Promoting teamwork
- Soliciting feedback

**It is not enough to articulate values and to put them into formal company literature.** Every supervisor, manager, and senior executive should be able to rhyme them off. To work they need to be "living values" that show up in the day to day

operations. Their purpose is to act as a powerful social control system. They form the basis of organizational culture in which people share expectations which guide behaviors. Randomly testing your managers will give you a good indication of whether your company values are alive and well.

Defining values, more often than not, becomes an intellectual exercise. However reasonable this may appear, it is likely only exciting for those engaged in the exercise. It does nothing for those who are in charge of managing people. All too often, the criteria has been made at the rational level and they have left people's hearts behind. **To get "buy-in" you must address both the head and the heart.**

In our example, Carl's manager has not followed through on what the company espouses as acceptable behavior. What they have tolerated has grown. The organization talks about putting people first but their actions show they put business first. There are a few options. They can do a 360 and get feedback to support their contention; they can do a performance appraisal outlining the need for improvement, they can get Carl an executive coach to help him gain insight into how his behavior is inhibiting his advancement or he can be dismissed. If he is dismissed, you can be sure his successor will display different behavior not to mention anyone else who may be doubting the company's commitment to values.

### **What do People-Centered Companies Do?**

According to Pfeffer and O'Reilly in Hidden Value, three common themes underlie the things that successful companies do to develop and tap the potential of their people:

- The company has a clear, well-articulated set of values that are the foundation for management practices that provide for the company's competitive success.
- The company has a remarkable degree of alignment and consistency in the people-centered practices that express its core values. They hire, fire, and promote based of these values.
- Senior managers in these companies (not just the founders or the CEO) are leaders whose primary role is to ensure that the values are maintained and constantly made real to all of the people who work in the organization.

**The most visible characteristics that differentiates the successful companies are their values and the fact that the values come first.**

Why are values so important?

Because money by itself isn't sufficient for motivating long-term high performance. **Most of us need to believe that what we are doing makes a difference to others and that our contribution is important.** We also want to feel that we are valued as people, not simply as economic agents. We want to be respected for who we are, not simply for what we do.

As we continue into this New Year with new uncertainties, companies will be confronted with an increasingly mobile society and cynicism about corporate life. Companies more than ever need to have a clear understanding of their people and their values in order to make work meaningful and thereby attract, motivate and retain outstanding people.

For those wanting to improve their management and leadership skills, here is a suggestion from Stuart Levine, taken from *The Six Fundamentals of Success*.

After any major league game, coaches review the day's videotapes relentlessly. They watch it over and over to see what worked and what didn't. Managers can use this technique as well. At the end of the day, perhaps on your way home, spend a few minutes going over in your mind what work and what didn't. Think about the conversations you had, the actions you took and how you handled challenging situations. Reflect on what it is that you learned about yourself and others. Commit to improving. Congratulate yourself and what you did well. Do it every day until it becomes a habit.

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