

# It's Time to Take a Fresh Look at Your Company's Values

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Every great culture needs a mission, a vision, and values. Its mission is the organization's indelible purpose and reason for being. Its vision is its aspiration for itself. And its values (or virtues) are the way an organization commits to working — a statement of how a company does what it does and the principles it will consistently abide by. But these are never meant to be static. Just as the environment around a company changes, so must the company itself.

As you think ahead to what may be the “new normal,” it's time for organizations to refresh what they stand for. The world has changed with Covid, and it's almost certain that your old mission, vision, and values don't fully match today's context. There is a new emerging focus on things like health (both mental and physical), flexibility, diversity and equity, and other topics. Your customers have likely radically reinvented their lives or businesses, making them reassess what they want or need from your company. And the people in your organization are likely more focused on purpose but less connected to what you stand for, either because they are new (given high turnover) or have been in the midst of reinventing themselves.

But how can a company seek to refresh its mission, vision, and values?

It's essential that an organization's leadership team — from the CEO down — own the mission, vision, and values of an organization and the process by which they are formulated. But as I note in the *HBR Guide to Crafting Your Purpose*, every single person in an organization has a part to play, whether shaping the larger corporate process, their own activities, or the culture of their individual teams. So, these statements must be owned and actualized by the organization as a community.

Typically, the organization's leadership team (including the CEO) will tee up the process by asking a series of straightforward questions:

- **Mission:** What is the core purpose of our collective work together? Why do we exist and do what we do? This is the north star around which cultures are built, the single thing each person can point to as their reason for working in community.
- **Vision:** What are we hoping to achieve together? I prefer these to be both aspirational and actionable, meaning they articulate a bold, long-term vision but one that may actually be achieved by the company (rather than so bold as to be outlandish or unreachable). This is the core articulate of the journey you are on together and how you know whether you are making progress.
- **Values:** What core principles will guide the way we work together as colleagues and for our clients? Values are the moral code of an organization — the set of rules you all embrace and abide by that reflect the ethics of the people in the organization and hold everyone accountable to the right standard of behavior.

In addition, it's important in each area to ask “what's changed” over the last two years, which may surface interesting insights about the underlying shifts in the culture and focus of the firm. What is outdated and needs to be left behind? What's new that needs to be embraced?

As a rule of thumb, the ultimate answers to these questions should be simple, memorable, and authentic. Mission and vision should be one sentence each and easy enough to remember that people can repeat them. They don't need to be incredibly original, but they have to be authentic and distinct enough that you can use them to hold one another accountable. Values should be one word or a simple phrase that, again, need not be completely original but should be distinct, meaningful, and memorable.

With these questions in hand, leadership teams at companies should design a process for asking these questions in community and then embedding the answers in the culture. The legendary artist Michelangelo once wrote that, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” Mission, vision, and values are the same. They already exist within your work and your people. The job of an

organization and its leaders is not to impose these things like a blank canvas, but to carefully chisel, shape, and refine what is already there.

Here are a few tips for engaging your employees as you ask the questions outlined above and then communicate the answers out to everyone in the firm:

### **Engage the organization comprehensively.**

Let everyone in the organization know you are embarking on a refresh of the mission, vision, and values — taking into special account the changes of the last two years. Make the process formal and public, and think of it as a fun way for everyone to reengage with the company's purpose and principles — or help new hires connect more with the organization. Particularly in hybrid or remote environments, this can be a great way to get colleagues reconnected to the organization and to one another.

### **Listen extensively and authentically.**

Have senior leaders engage a broad group of employees directly. Some of this can be technologically enabled — videos from leaders sent to everyone, surveys, and online tools where employees can submit ideas. But much of it should be real person-to-person contact. Senior leaders from the CEO down should personally lead diverse focus groups throughout the organization, in person or by video, as a way of both connecting with a broad group of people and hearing their feedback directly. In this process of crafting company purpose, leaders should encourage a culture of receptivity to feedback on mission, vision, and values that will long outlast the formal exercise. Highlight great employee feedback. Reward it. And cultivate a leadership team that listens gratefully.

### **“Launch” the new statements and then communicate consistently.**

Release the vision, mission, and values companywide. Post them on the walls in offices and send each employee a wallet-sized card highlighting them. Put them on the website (potentially with deeper explainers for the simple constructs) for external clients to see. Have leaders work them into company talks, presentations, and events comprehensively. And consider some “swag” (t-shirts, coffee mugs, or similar items) to celebrate their release. We often need to hear things 6-20 times before we internalize them (known as “effective frequency” in advertising) so consistent communication is key.

### **Recognize those who live the company's purpose and values.**

Humans learn best through stories. Words about abstract concepts are fine, but real-life examples of employees living into the vision, mission, and values are irreplaceable. They also offer an opportunity up-front and over time to reward and applaud those employees in an organization who are culture carriers. Find stories of employees demonstrating the company's purpose, and highlight small pockets where you are achieving parts of the vision — perhaps with client or employee interviews and profiles. Shoot videos of colleagues celebrating the times they saw others live the company's values. Create

company awards that publicly acknowledge those culture carries who are leading the way.

Purpose matters more than ever to companies and individuals. Now is an essential time to reconsider the core mission, vision, and values of your company. Neglecting this moment would be a missed opportunity. A thoughtful approach to these topics can yield a culture that is focused, reenergized, and fresh.