

Article 3: Values

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The Language for What is Important

Values are a personal and professional matter. Personally, you have values. They are those few words that provide a language for what you may quit your job over, break up with someone over, or have a family fight over. For me, some of those are authenticity, integrity, honesty, curiosity, and respect. When one of those values is disregarded, I want to flip a table and get out as fast as I can. Yet, when those values are honored in my relationships, lifestyle, and workplace, I want to stick around and keep being present.

According to Louis Efron with Gallup, in the professional realm, values are “a way to do business and achieve outcomes.” Values are more than words on a wall; they aid company purposes by providing a structure for the company mission. It is unlikely someone could run or be a part of a successful business long-term if personal and professional values do not align.

How do you know what your company values are? The company culture should reflect them and be lived out by employees at all levels. Louis Efron outlines three ways to “embed” your values into your business culture to make them more than words on a wall.

First, your executives and managers need to lead by example. If company values are not implemented from the top down, employees will not perceive them as an actual priority. Additionally, if values are not being modeled, you will not retain employees who truly believed in the values they thought the company embodied.

Second, collecting and sharing stories of values being lived out in your company is a great way to both assess whether they are present and encourage employees to continue upholding them.

For instance, I had the privilege of going to lunch with the Greenville Chamber of Commerce COO, Liz Horton. She shared a much-appreciated perspective on values in the workplace, including an example of her team living them out.

A value of the Greenville Chamber is “achieve together,” and recently their staff went out and delivered thank-you popcorn to supporters and partners, simply to express gratitude. It took a village to pull off the task, and everyone helped out—from the CEO of the Chamber to many members of her team. Each team member contributed according to their role: forming lists of partners, mapping out efficient routes, stuffing the bags with gifts, and more. They achieved their objective together, from the top down.

If you cannot think of tangible examples of your company's values being lived out, then it's unlikely your values are more than words.

Finally, Efron argues that to bring values fully into the workplace, they must be reinforced, and employees must be held accountable for behaving in alignment with them. This starts with employees believing in and applying the company's values to their own lives. Unfortunately, only 27% of employees believe in their company's values, and only 23% feel they can apply them to their lives. This disconnect between stated values and people's lived experience breeds a disingenuous workplace.

As company values become the expectation and the norm, employees will begin to hold one another accountable to those standards. It is the job of the business leaders to establish values in the workplace, live them out tangibly, seek out and celebrate stories of others doing the same, and create a culture where living out values is the norm.

For those reading this who think your company does not have values—I really doubt that. Maybe you just don't have the language for them yet. However, everyone and every company lives by a code. If you dig into the purpose of your company, you will hopefully discover that listing your values provides a memorable language for what is important to you as a company.