

Creating a Values-Based Road Map

Here's how to build an organization that will prosper.

By Peter Smergut

Values are vital to your organization's success. You can't fulfill your mission unless you clarify your values and infuse them through every system in your organization.

How do you create such a value structure? Here are some suggestions to guide the way:

Build Consensus.

Organizations often fail to take advantage of their most important resource — committed staff. The best way to gain commitment and consensus is to be sure your staff's values are aligned with those of your organization.

Without a shared-values framework to guide them, people sometimes get in the way of the mission. Thus, the organizational structure must promote a safe environment where opinions are accepted and differences encouraged.

Make sure your organization's values are clearly defined. Then repeat them continually so that employees can see how their work relates to those values.

When communicating your values, acknowledge your staff's diversity. Bringing people's different perspectives into alignment with your values creates a synergy that will strengthen your organization.

Ask How You're Doing.

Now that you've established the values, create a survey to see how those values resonate in the organization. Have staff answer the survey anonymously.

When the survey results are back, prepare a report card

announcing staff's responses. Share it with everyone in the organization.

Do you just need a new water cooler, or is it time to reroute all the plumbing lines?

Create a Values Committee.

One of the worst things you can do is receive information and then sit on it. To avoid this trap, assemble a values steering committee. This committee, made up of high-potential staff, can evaluate the survey results and follow through on issues that result from the feedback. The committee should ask and answer questions such as these:

- Is communication effective?
- Is our work environment employee-friendly?
- How are differences between management and line staff addressed as a result of the organization's values?

This committee becomes an ongoing working group, insuring that the values are a critical part of the evolving organization. Committee members can offer staff feedback as new ideas are introduced. They can help you determine if all you need is a new water cooler or if it's time to reroute all the plumbing lines.

Use Focus Groups.

When interpreting survey results, it's often difficult to see what dynamics shaped the

responses. That's why you need a focus group.

With help from the steering committee, establish a focus group that represents a cross-section of the organization. This group should reflect line, administrative, and supervisory staff and all others who have an impact on your organization.

The focus group's role is to suggest ways to address the survey's findings. Ask the group such questions as these:

- What is it about our communication system that isn't working?
- How can we clarify our organization's values?
- What elements of our staff support plan fall short?
- How can we improve the organization's systems?

Make Change Happen.

Now that you have your survey results and a clear direction set by the steering committee and focus group, create an action plan that addresses the issues raised. There's often a propensity to gather data but not bring closure to the process. Don't let that happen to you.

Listening to your staff isn't enough. You must lay a clear trail showing how and when the suggestions will be implemented. Use whatever form of communication you wish, as long as the message is clear. Failure to implement is worse than never making an effort in the first place.

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Integrate Your Values.

You've identified, evaluated, and articulated your values. Now what? To unite all members of the organization into a cohesive group, launch the following strategies:

- **Review your job descriptions.** Do they reflect your values? Or do they simply chronicle job tasks?
- **Assess your interview process.** Does it embody your values? Are interviewers trained to ask value-laden questions that highlight your organization's vision?
- **Reorganize your training program** so that values are an integral part of all principles and practices.
- **Check your annual performance appraisals.** Do they encompass your values? Remember, you evaluate what you value. If performance appraisals don't mirror your values, how will employees know if they're meeting expectations?

Be a Hedgehog.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins expands on Isaiah Berlin's essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," based on the parable, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Although the fox is clever and has many strategies for attacking the hedgehog, he will never win, because at the last moment the hedgehog always curls into a ball of spikes and defeats the fox's plans.

All great organizations are hedgehogs — simple, dowdy creatures that know one big thing and stick to it, Collins argues. Not-so-great organizations are foxes — cunning creatures that know many things but lack the consistency that comes from a deep understanding of their values. Hedgehogs, says Collins, simplify a complex world into one great concept, guided by their answers to three questions:

- What can we be the best in the world at doing?
- What's the best way for us to generate sustained cash flow?
- What are we deeply passionate about?

With the answers to these questions and the set of values you've pinpointed, you're well on the way to building a truly great organization. The key is to concentrate on what you've identified as essential and ignore everything else. Such a relentless focus on a single crystalline idea, based on shared values, is the path to greatness.

Prepare for the Long Haul.

Don't glamorize the values process as the next great cure. Focus on your staff, and help them feel connected to the organization and its vision. Change is slow, and it's most lasting when all employees channel their energies in the same direction. A strong values commitment can fortify this process and help you maintain a competitive advantage in an ever more competitive environment. Good luck! ■

Resources

Collins, Jim, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, www.harpercollins.com).

*Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Using Surveys & Focus Groups to Gather Market Data," *Nonprofit World*,

Vol. 13, No. 3.

*Jenson, Donna, "Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

*Simon, Judy, "How to Conduct Focus Groups," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.

**Starred resources are available from the Society's Resource Center. The articles from Volumes 14-23 are available free on-line at www.snpo.org/members, and articles prior to Volume 14 are available on CD-ROM at www.snpo.org/publications/articles.php.*

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