

Build an Organization Based on Values

Why Values, What Values?

By [Susan M. Heathfield](#), About.com Guide

"Our people are our most important asset." You've heard these words many times, if you work in an organization. Yet how many organizations act as if they really believe these words? Not many. These words are the clear expression of a value, and values are visible through the actions people take, not their talk.

Values form the foundation for everything that happens in your workplace. If you are the founder of an organization, your values permeate the workplace. You naturally hire people who share your values. Whatever you value, will largely govern the actions of your workforce.

Sample Workplace Value-based Actions

If you value integrity and you experience a quality problem in your manufacturing process, you honestly inform your customer of the exact nature of the problem. You discuss your actions to eliminate the problem, and the anticipated delivery time the customer can expect. If integrity is not a fundamental value, you may make excuses and mislead the customer.

If you value and care about the people in your organization, you will pay for health insurance, dental insurance, retirement accounts and provide regular raises and bonuses for dedicated staff. If you value equality and a sense of family, you will wipe out the physical trappings of power, status, and inequality such as executive parking places and offices that grow larger by a foot with every promotion.

Whatever You Value Is What You Live in Your Organization

You know, as an individual, what you personally value. However, most of you work in organizations that have already operated for many years. The values, and the subsequent culture created by those values, are in place, for better or worse.

If you are generally happy with your work environment, you undoubtedly selected an organization with values congruent with your own. If you're not, watch for the disconnects between what you value and the actions of people in your organization.

As an HR professional, you will want to influence your larger organization to identify its core values, and make them the foundation for its interactions with employees, customers, and suppliers. Minimally, you will want to work within your own HR organization to identify a strategic framework for serving your customers that is firmly value-based.

Strategic Framework

Every organization has a vision or picture of what it desires for its future, whether foggy or crystal clear. The current mission of the organization or the purpose for its existence is also understood in general terms.

The values members of the organization manifest in daily decision making, and the norms or relationship guidelines which informally define how people interact with each other and customers, are also visible. But are these usually vague and unspoken understandings enough to fuel your long term success? I don't think so.

Every organization has a choice. You can allow these fundamental underpinnings of your organization to develop on their own with each individual acting in a self-defined vacuum. Or, you can invest the time to proactively define them to best serve members of the organization and its customers.

Many successful organizations agree upon and articulate their vision, mission or purpose, values, and strategies so all organization members can enroll in and own their achievement.

Next, read about the strategic planning framework to create your vision, mission, and values.

Want the background about why values are important in an organization? See the impact that [identifying organizational values](#)¹ can have.

Values are traits or qualities that are considered worthwhile; they represent an individual's highest priorities and deeply held driving forces.

Value statements are grounded in values and define how people want to behave with each other in the organization. They are statements about how the organization will value customers, suppliers, and the internal community. Value statements describe actions that are the living enactment of the fundamental values held by most individuals within the organization.

Vision is a statement about what the organization wants to become. The vision should resonate with all members of the organization and help them feel proud, excited, and part of something much bigger than themselves. A vision should stretch the organization's capabilities and image of itself. It gives shape and direction to the organization's future.

Mission/Purpose is a precise description of what an organization does. It should describe the business the organization is in. It is a definition of "why" the organization exists currently. Each member of an organization should be able to verbally express this mission.

Strategies are the broadly defined four or five key approaches the organization will use to accomplish its mission and drive toward the vision. Goals and action plans usually flow from each strategy.

One example of a strategy is employee empowerment and teams. Another is to pursue a new worldwide market in Asia. Another is to streamline your current distribution system using lean management principles.

I recommend that you start developing this strategic framework by identifying your organization's values. Create an opportunity for as many people as possible to participate in this process. All the rest of your strategic framework should grow from living these.

What are Values?

The following are examples of values. You might use these as the starting point for discussing values within your organization.

ambition, competency, individuality, equality, integrity, service, responsibility, accuracy, respect, dedication, diversity, improvement, enjoyment/fun, loyalty, credibility, honesty, innovativeness, teamwork, excellence, accountability, empowerment, quality, efficiency, dignity, collaboration, stewardship, empathy, accomplishment, courage, wisdom, independence, security, challenge, influence, learning, compassion, friendliness, discipline/order, generosity, persistency, optimism, dependability, flexibility

Why Identify and Establish Values?

Effective organizations identify and develop a clear, concise and shared meaning of values/beliefs, priorities, and direction so that everyone understands and can contribute. Once defined, values impact every aspect of your organization.

You must support and nurture this impact or identifying values will have been a wasted exercise. People will feel fooled and misled unless they see the impact of the exercise within your organization.

- If you want the values you identify to have an impact, the following must occur.
- People demonstrate and model the values in action in their personal work behaviors, decision making, contribution, and interpersonal interaction.
- Organizational values help each person establish priorities in their daily work life.
- Values guide every decision that is made once the organization has cooperatively created the values and the value statements.
- Rewards and recognition within the organization are structured to recognize those people whose work embodies the values the organization embraced.
- Organizational goals are grounded in the identified values.
- Adoption of the values and the behaviors that result is recognized in regular performance feedback.
- People hire and promote individuals whose outlook and actions are congruent with the values.
- Only the active participation of all members of the organization will ensure a truly organization-wide, value-based, shared culture.