



A Leadership Conundrum

Bringing your core values to the fore

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Values: The compelling forces that drive our actions. The focal point that keeps us on track in a way that honors our conscience. The principles that keep all aspects and elements of our lives in alignment with our deepest beliefs. These definitions and descriptors of values sound clear-cut and simple. They are. The issue with values is when they are in conflict with how we do business.

Let me give you an example of a very relevant values conflict. Our state mandates masks everywhere. A local business owner privately supports this mandate. He sees it as important for containing COVID-19 and protecting public health. More importantly, one of his core values is to respect authority and abide by the law.

Conflict came in because his business partners think masking is cumbersome and intrusive on individual rights. They are of the mindset that rules and laws are options. While the law-abiding owner very much wanted to insist on masks in their warehouses, he was uncomfortable addressing the issue with his partners, so masking was not required.

When there was a significant outbreak among employees in their warehouses, the owner deeply regretted not honoring his values. He was extremely remorseful when employees took the virus home to their families and it spread. He felt tremendous guilt when a longtime employee died. Yet, he said nothing.

What happened? Was it peer pressure? Was it the wimp factor? Or was it something else? My thought is that it was a combination of factors. Mary C. Gentile authored a book that addresses these factors in a very thoughtful, comprehensive way. In “Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right,” Gentile holds that, in order to speak up, we have to find and own our voices. This means that each leader has to get comfortable expressing what is most important to him (or her). It means that you cannot simply go along to get along. Sometimes you have to risk being unpopular, ostracized and/or even mocked. The question for each leader is this: Am I willing to pay the costs for having the courage of my convictions?

I think that bringing your values to the fore does not actually begin with finding and using your voice. I believe that it starts with discovering your values. In my work with leaders, I am surprised at how few can actually articulate their values. Many have never thought seriously about their core values. We are so often on autopilot, functioning at frenetic paces, that we do not



stop and reflect on what matters most.

The foundation of leadership development is the reflection that enables you to discover your ethical beliefs. To be clear, this has nothing to do with your religion or your politics; it has everything to do with your fundamental beliefs. They should be the compass directing everything you do in your personal and professional lives.

Getting to the point of discovering deeply held values, though you may never have spoken them, requires quiet, persistent reflection. This reflection is what allows you to deepen your self-awareness and your self-knowledge. Gentile says that values-based action comes from the alignment between self-knowledge and self-image. It is that alignment that allows for consistent, committed and courageous action. But that action cannot happen unless — and until — you have an understanding of the values that drive you.

There are any number of ways to explore and identify your values. I typically present leaders with a list of roughly 100 values. I ask them to review them and narrow it down to their top 10. I ask them to write very detailed descriptions of what those values mean to them — to define the values in the most practical terms. After they have done the work to define them, I ask them to reflect on them for a few days. When we get back together, I ask them to narrow that list of 10 to five.

This is the point where they shed the things that are good to have, but not fundamental. I ask them to take a few days to reflect on these values and how they are evident in their lives. I ask them to jot down examples of when each value has guided their decision making. I encourage them to take notes as they are reflecting.

In our next session, I ask them to narrow the five to the three core values that they simply could not, would not, live without. These values reflect the essence of who they are as leaders and as human beings.

This facilitated exploration of values enables leaders to better understand how they can use their values to guide decisions and actions. My belief is that when a leader identifies his values and brings them to the fore, he experiences a lot less internal confusion or crises of conscience. I also think that this work leads to higher levels of self-respect and respect from others. A feeling of internal hypocrisy is self-sabotaging. It keeps leaders from being their best, from leading in a way that gives a sense of satisfaction.

The other benefit from leading with your values is that everyone knows where you stand and why. There is no confusion in the organization about your choices, decisions and direction. People know and understand who you are and why you make the decisions you make. As trite as this sounds, identifying and operating from your core values allows you to be an authentic leader. I think the terms “authenticity” and “transparency” are overused. However, in this case it really is all about being authentic and transparent.

Before I wrap up, I want to address the issue of value judgments. Leaders often judge their own values by external standards. This is especially true of people who like to please others. Not only do many of us judge our own values, we judge those of others. There is often the expectation that all values need to be pure and altruistic. That is so unrealistic.

The range of possible values is as broad and diverse as any of us can imagine. And, I do not believe that there are many wrongs or rights when it comes to values. I believe that values come from our early learning. We have the choice to change, alter or modify our values; they are not fixed throughout the course of life.

If we choose to change our values, we are not well-served by labeling them as “bad.” Consider saying that they do not serve you well at this point or in the future that you imagine. Limit-

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ing judgments creates more opportunities to objectively explore our own values without shame or guilt. It also makes room for us to develop respect for the many diverse, divergent values of others.

In summary, values exploration is essential in leadership development. Understanding your own core values provides you with data for informed, conscience-based decision making. It also raises your self-knowledge in a way that allows you to

formulate a realistic self-image. This is tough work that takes you off of autopilot and into deeper self-awareness. It is tough, but necessary, work for leadership excellence. ■

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