



Using Values to Engage Yourself and Your Organization

By Francisco Gomez

THERE are numerous jobs, particularly in manufacturing, that require workers to engage in repetitive and seemingly monotonous work. During a recent visit at a multinational food producer's manufacturing plant, I observed a group of employees perform their job of picking up and resetting bottles that had tipped over on a conveyor belt. I learned that they were accountable for doing this for hours at a time. The first questions that came to mind were, "How do leaders engage these employees?" and "What motivates an employee whose job it is to sort bottles all day long?"

Helping employees understand how their contributions support a value that resonates is one of the many powerful ways in which a leader can add to his or her effectiveness.

When it comes to motivating people, what's trash for one person could be treasure for another. That's an important general principle that all leaders should learn and incorporate into their management approach. One employee might find public recognition or being asked for input to be highly motivating while another will find it highly embarrassing and punishing. Another equally relevant principle is that motivation is fickle and that it wavers within each person at different times. Think about your own behavior and sources of motivation. Sometimes the experience of learning a new skill can be highly engaging. Buckling down and developing the necessary components for doing a new task can feel great at first. But then, after the short honeymoon phase is over, the work to become fluent in those skills begins to feel burdensome, and your motivation for fully acquiring the skills wavers. It is at this point that those who find success do so because they can see the bigger picture in acquiring those skills.



This article is about how to establish the bigger picture as an anchor in the workplace so that you or your employees can maintain momentum and break through the inevitable adversity and resistance that accompanies doing or learning anything worth doing. More specifically, it's about the importance of values and how to use them to inspire yourself and your workforce.

VALUES AND THE CREATION OF MEANING

Consider the following two quotes:

“The ability to make long term commitments strikes me as the key to a good life. And how well you make and live out those commitments will determine the quality of your life....to me a commitment is falling in love with something and building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters”

- David Brooks, New York Times columnist

“In the face of turbulence and change, culture and values become the major source of continuity and coherence, of renewal and sustainability. Leaders must be institution-builders who imbue the organization with meaning that inspires today and endures tomorrow. They must find an underlying purpose and a strong set of values that serve as a basis for longer-term decisions even in the midst of volatility....Indeed, emphasizing purpose and values helps leaders support and facilitate self-organizing networks that can respond quickly to change because they share an understanding of the right thing to do.”

- Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Adding Values to Valuations: Indra Nooyi and Others as Institution-Builders

These two quotes highlight the importance of creating meaning and purpose and describe the commitment to values as keys for personal and organizational resilience and perseverance. When defined and used effectively, values can be used as a philosophical backbone and guiding principle for decisions and most importantly, bolster resolve during those times of discomfort when you most want to quit. Values may not lessen the hardship necessarily, but they will reframe it and help you perceive it in a different light.

Think of the pain experienced during a longrun or intense workout. No matter how painful those last few miles or reps on the squat rack might be, they're experienced positively because there is meaning, purpose, and the effort supports the value of optimizing your health and fitness. You probably even welcome and embrace that pain (consider what martial artists, ultramarathon runners and rock climbers happily put themselves through). Values can help create frames of positivity around the discomfort that accompanies effort.

This applies well to the workplace. Consider the number of challenges you and others in your organization face on a daily basis and the amount of effort you and your team have to invest. Think about undergoing an onerous merger, being forced to adapt to a difficult regulatory change, or being challenged with a particularly high KPI goal. Your leadership team can frame that experience for employees in a variety of ways. Depending on their influencing skills, they may either demand and push employees into compliance, or they might rally the team around the goal and inspire them by showing how their efforts support a value they all believe in. You can guess which gets you better engagement and performance. This highlights the difference between employees who perform because they have to, versus those that are motivated and inspired to do so.

PINPOINTING VALUES

An essential first step in leveraging your values to support engagement and sustainability is to clearly define them. This principle has been discussed in detail in *Pinpointing, Objectivity and Achieving Alignment*. Just like an archer doesn't release the arrow until they have a clear line of sight to the target, you can't take effective, deliberate action towards supporting your values unless you can visualize them with fine-grained detail. You define them clearly and then identify the behaviors that support them so that *they're easier to do and easier to observe others do*, during "those moments when love falters" and you'd rather hit the proverbial snooze button instead of meeting the commitment. Essentially, the bigger picture is comprised of values and their support-





ing behavior—for example, “Responsible stewardship of finances” with the supporting behavior of “Investing 12% of your net income” or “Optimizing health and fitness” with the supporting behavior of “Training in the gym four times a week with a personal trainer.” In the organizational setting, a value of, “Collaboration and communication” could be supported by, “All leaders asking for feedback from their cross departmental peers on their performance on a monthly basis.” In other words, the first step is to be objective and pinpoint your values.

REINFORCING THE BEHAVIORS THAT SUPPORT YOUR VALUES

Once the supporting behaviors have been identified, they need to be encouraged. Even well-defined values often get wasted by organizations because this step is missed. Once developed, they tend to get placed up on the wall and never actually used. Putting them up on a poster will not sustain employee behavior. However, the right leadership activity can sustain and deliberately improve them. Using values is when leaders

actively look for examples of and encourage the behaviors that uphold the purpose for why the company exists. Once management and employees are aligned on what the values mean, they need to hold each other accountable for doing and encouraging the behaviors that support them with their teams. If one of them includes “Honesty and transparent communication,” then make sure you reinforce their honesty when they admit to a mistake or give you constructive feedback. If your company claims that “Continuous improvement and innovation” is a value, then don’t punish or ignore when an employee shares his/her ideas and input for improvement. If a company value is “Safety is our First Priority,” then make sure you celebrate when an employee stops production due to a safety concern. You should be encouraging these behaviors with precision, reinforcement, and positive coaching.

NATURAL REINFORCEMENT AND VALUES

The power of conversations should not be overlooked as a vehicle for reinforcement. Conversations with your employees have the ability to do many things, including inspire them or tear them down. And this goes far beyond just telling them they’re doing a good job. To quote my colleague, David Uhl, “Leaders should be reinforcement *arrangers* for employees more than providers.” Fortunately, there are numerous sources of reinforcement available in the workplace if you know how to look for them. Part of your

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job as a leader is to be thoughtful about how what you say and do helps employees connect with these sources. And although the sources of reinforcement are vast, the gold standard in motivating employees happens when leaders figure out how to tap into internal motivation or natural reinforcement for their performance.

Employees don't like to feel like pawns, and they don't like to spin their wheels. They like to see that their performance makes a difference. Coaching employees to see the impact that they're having on their peers, customers, results and, ultimately, how their performance is consistent with values they believe in, can be one of the most influential and sustainable sources of motivation for employee performance. This qualifies as natural reinforcement because the motivation comes from doing the behavior itself and seeing the impact it has as opposed to reinforcement that comes from someone providing it (as is the case with recognition, positive feedback, rewards, etc.). Once an employee can clearly observe that the way they follow a certain procedure affects the efficiency of the process, how their reviewing their notes prior to the sales call will increase the likelihood of a sale, and how their providing peer feedback or reporting Near Misses supports the value of "Safety First," then they are much more likely to continue doing these behaviors. The impact itself becomes the source of motivation that will sustain those behaviors.

A leader's coaching conversations can help direct an employee's attention to this source of reinforcement. Using impact statements during feedback (e.g., "As a result of your input during the production meeting, we

found a solution to that problem.") and using the coaching questions approach covered in *Engaging Employees with a Beginner's Mind* can help with this. Similarly, having a company or team narrative comprised of your company values and then showing or asking employees how their performance supports them can be an inspirational way to help employees connect with natural reinforcement.



GOING BEYOND THE POSTER ON THE WALL

There are many tactical ways to convert your values from inspirational posters on the wall to measurable and important behavior in the workplace. A few examples include:

- Make a practice of asking your leadership and staff for the best example of somebody living up to a company value. You can do this one-on-one or during team meetings.

- Incorporate company values and the behaviors that support them in your staffing process. Ask applicants behavior-based questions that inform you of their compatibility with the practices that support your values.
- Incorporate the behaviors that support your values in any formal performance assessment.
- Embed company values into your coaching conversations through impact statements and coaching questions.
- Most importantly, as mentioned above, familiarize yourself and your employees with the behaviors that support the company values and reinforce the supporting behaviors when you see them.

Returning to the original question of how the workers sorting bottles in the food manufacturing plant found motivation to engage in a seemingly rote and repetitive

task; the answer came later that day. When the employee was asked what he found most rewarding about working at the plant, his answer was short, but it spoke volumes.. He said, “I’m motivated just by knowing that we feed the world. The work I do is putting food on people’s tables.” He didn’t see his job as just sorting bottles. He saw it as a contribution to an inspirational value.

In order to be effective at motivating employees, leaders need to be deliberate and thoughtful about how they attempt to reinforce the performance of their employees. Part of this requires getting to know their people well, choosing the most effective sources of reinforcement for them as individuals and then varying their approach when providing coaching. Saying “good job” isn’t the only way, and it is typically very far from the best way to reinforce behavior. Helping employees understand how their contributions support a value that resonates with them is one of the many powerful ways in which a leader can add to his or her effectiveness and inspire discretionary effort in the workforce.



[About the Author]

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As a bilingual senior consultant, Francisco supports clients with large-scale behavior change and has a proven record of generating measurable performance improvements across a diverse set of industries and business needs. In his free time, Francisco enjoys cooking with his wife and daughters, practicing Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and playing jazz drums.

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