



Values that actually mean something

What makes an organisation's values more than just words on a page?

How do you create and embed values that actually mean something?



You may have seen corporate values posted on walls, mugs, coasters and screensavers. Despite attempts to consistently communicate them, many values don't hit the mark.

According to HRM online, only 22% of employees surveyed feel completely informed about their organisation's values. Employees often don't know the values and even if they do know them, aren't committed to upholding them. Then you have leaders who don't live by them, meaning you have values that are just words, not the key enablers they were meant to be.

Over the past 30 years we have had the privilege of working with over 100 organisations across diverse industries in 76 countries. We've seen all manner of ways that organisations have developed and implemented values. Some work well, but many don't. So what is it that separates the average from the great? What do the best organisations do in this space?

1. They understand that values enable transformational business outcomes and invest the time to ensure they have the right ones

Zappos has achieved extraordinary results over the past few years and its success was recognised when Amazon bought it for a whopping US\$1.2 billion. Zappo's CEO Tony Hsieh was quoted in saying, "If I could go back and do Zappos all over again I would actually come up with our values from day one."

Over the past few years I've had the privilege of working closely with Kennards Hire, a family-owned hire company with over 170 sites across Australia and NZ.

What has truly impressed me is how their values (Fair Dinkum; Every Customer is a Raving Fan; Taking Hire Higher; One Family) have become embedded in their DNA at all levels and are true cornerstones to their success.

An organisation without clear values is like a house built on sand - it doesn't have the foundational support required for longevity. Values help shape an organisation's culture and should inform many important decisions.

2. They involve the right people in the development of their values

So who should be involved in shaping the organisation's values? Involve too many people and you can burn up a lot of time without anyone committing to anything. Involve too few and it can take a lot of time 'selling the values in' to employees and still may not deliver the commitment required for them to be successful. For organisations of 100+, I suggest involving 15 or so leaders, owners and key influencers before seeking feedback from a larger contingent.

'Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me (in the right way) and I'll commit.'

3. They use the right process

As landing on the right organisational values takes time, rushing the process is not a good idea. Equally, leaders attempting to internally run a 'values creation session' often struggle to get the traction needed. I've found an iterative process works best with an external facilitator guiding conversations without bias or judgement. Utilising anonymous polling helps avoid the loudest person in the room dominating discussions and helps to quickly assess understanding, and commitment to progress conversations.

Strong values require understanding and commitment. Agreement from each participant is nice but not necessary, and if over emphasised will end up derailing the desired outcomes. If you build a strong enough 'why' around the co-created values, commitment is much easier to achieve. Alignment of personal values to the business values also helps ensure greater commitment.

4. They settle on values that are easy to remember

Less is more. Many people who have read Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People" will not be able to name more than four of the habits. Why? It isn't because the habits are not memorable or because the book isn't very good. Quite the contrary. It is because seven can be difficult to remember (unless it forms an acronym). Therefore, I recommend choosing four or less values to provide greater focus.

5. They understand the importance of behaviours

How do you know if people are 'living the values'? The answer lies in observable behaviours. Teams should identify key supportive and unsupportive behaviours that underpin the values and hold each other to account. This is a step that is often missed but is an important one.

Values are the essential principles to guide an organisation's internal actions and influence the relationship with customers and other key stakeholders. Deeply embedded values should guide hiring and firing decisions and provide