Values are More Important than Ever
Good Judgment in Difficult Times

Unprecedented changes, crisis management, and an uncertain future are shaping our world in the first quarter of 2020 and possibly longer. Many leaders have had to make decisions beyond their comfort zones without the luxury of using deep reflection, data-gathering and input. This flexibility and nimbleness, though, is critical as we pivot to a virtual workplace resting precariously on shifting sand.

Is there a true north to guide our navigation? The answer is yes, and it resides in our personal core values and the established organizational (team) values. Leaders make decisions based on their personal core values every day, whether they realize it or not. However, stressful times will often hijack our logic because of the urgency of a situation. That's why it is important to breathe and to remember we have been making important decisions, big and small, using our core values to guide us all along.

Well-defined team values shape your culture and direct how your team pursues its priorities. If team values and norms were practiced consistently before social distancing, they are likely to be firmly embedded in the virtual culture and continuing to inform your employees' day-to-day actions. Values also dictate which behaviors are appreciated and which ones are unacceptable. This cultural framework is the foundation for accountability. While accountability is always important, it is even more pressing during a time of crisis or major change. It is, after all, when we are under pressure that we show the world our true colors. That is as valid for the leader as it is for the team members.

> *"It's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are."*
> – Roy Disney

Challenges leaders may encounter

Let's face it, when we are fighting to maintain our three missions of teaching, research and service, odds are trust, transparency, collegiality, respect, and teamwork won't automatically take priority. When we are in survival mode and the "fight or flight" response takes over, leaders tend to shift to focusing more on the foreground of operational business decisions. Their field of vision becomes very restricted – often creating a false sense of "control." Leaders may need to intentionally pull back, open their mental aperture and take in the mid-ground and background. It takes courage to broaden our view at a time when our instincts are telling us to "hunker" down. It is important to remember to pay attention to the soft skills living within a workplace culture. Those are the crucial areas that promote how teams work together cohesively. The best cultures derive from the individual actions people take when using the values as their moral compass in making important decisions. Leaders who pay attention to both of these elements while leading through crisis are more effective: clarity about reaching goals combined with intentional focus on using values to strengthen team culture.

Strategies to keep values front and center

<u>If you are a team that hasn't created values yet, use this moment of change to tee up the dialogue</u>. Workplace cultures, both co-located and virtual, thrive when they have a shared language and a mutual purpose. While the virtual environment may not be the most ideal venue to hold these conversations, general discussions about team values and team norms can be fruitful. You may want to provide strong context for introducing the topic and the benefits to the team. Request they reflect ahead of time on their own personal values and share 3 that are a high priority. Using a process that identifies the values most common to the full team can be an interactive activity promoting engagement and buy-in.

The next conversation could focus on how the team can operationalize the top three commonly-held values. This is achieved by describing behaviors that demonstrate the value when team members are interacting with each other or with customers. Be careful to avoid defining the value. It is more helpful to think through the actions, behaviors, or commitments that exemplify the value.

Examples of operationalizing the value of "trust"
• *"I do what I say I am going to do."*
• *"I respect professional boundaries and when I am uncertain, I ask"*
• *"I deliver the tasks assigned to me consistently on time."*

Author Brené Brown in her book, *Dare to Lead,* says, *"A courageous culture connects its values to specific behaviors, so people know what is expected, encouraged, and rewarded within their team and organization. In addition to setting clear expectations, the process gives organizations shared language and a well-defined culture…Operationalized values also drive productive decision making. When values aren't clear, we can easily become paralyzed—or, just as dangerous, we become too impulsive. Operationalized values drive what I think of as the sweet spot of decision making: thoughtful and decisive."*

<u>Don't wait for the quarterly check-in.</u> Communicate directly and frequently about the importance of using team values during this time. Ask your team members if the team behavioral norms need to be refined because of the shift from co-location to isolation. Be intentional about asking: were the team norms we currently use to guide our interactions helpful for our current reality? We must walk our talk, even virtually, and be deliberate that our intentions, words, thoughts, and behaviors align with these values.

<u>Acknowledge when you see values being demonstrated</u>. One leader uses the hash tag in front of the value he observed in a playful shout out to his employee. For example, *"Joanna handled a very difficult situation with a faculty member with grace and respect. #CustomersFirst!"* Values are a testament to our true selves, because they are what matters the most to us. Having others see us living out our values and acknowledging that is affirming and empowering. It reinforces how our values influence those little voices in our heads telling us to live in integrity with our beliefs.

Final Thoughts

Leaders who are transparent about making value-based decisions bring teams together. During times of crisis, this approach may seem like a luxury, but it is fundamentally critical to operating effectively as a virtual team. It has the power to help teams become stronger and more unified than ever before. The decisions leaders make and the actions they take now create experiences for your employees. Those experiences will then shape their beliefs about being an accountable member of your team, whether in the old normal or the new normal. The beliefs formed from these crucible experiences will drive individual behaviors and actions going forward and ultimately team success. In times of crisis, we need to come together and set the standard for values-based judgments. These times will be remembered for a myriad of reasons – let one of them be for how we collectively chose to behave that resulted in connectedness and resilience. Today's values-driven decisions will solidify a firm foundation for a better future.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in the moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." – Martin Luther King, Jr.

References

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