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For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants

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Issue No 22: Values are the fortress

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Values are the fortress

Over time I have observed a subtle, but common trait amongst those I see as 'the best' leaders, and this is that they are clear on what they value both personally and for their organisation. In their role as a leader, they use values as guiding principles that they do not deviate from. A great example of someone values-driven is the likeable character, Darryl Kerrigan, from the movie 'The Castle'. Darryl is willing to take his case to the highest court in Australia for the values that he believes in, (family, home and fair go).

Another example is a managing director I know who let an 'up-and-coming' staff member go because she "... was not in alignment with our values." He then proceeded to clearly state all of the organisation's values, without a written prompt. Suffice to say, this managing director runs a very successful business.

The examples above are not meant to make light of what is the pressure cooker that is organisational life: being values-led can be a difficult path to navigate. At the same time, however, people are demanding values-driven and ethical leadership more than ever from their employers, managers and themselves. This is confirmed by several recent studies which conclude that prospective employees are increasingly assessing organisations based on their reputation and practices, before

deciding whether or not to join them. In a tight employment market for the very best talent there's a strong message from this.

To illustrate this struggle with values and the practicalities of running a business I will outline a case study which is an amalgam of situations I have observed in the field.

Case Study

This organisation has a clear set of values which include: growth, displaying initiative, team work, working to the best of your ability and fair reward for all. These values have been agreed within the organisation and the majority of staff operate accordingly. The managing director is having difficulty, however, with one manager, Jim, who is not only underperforming against key measures, (such as sales and growth), but also does not display initiative, team playing or a desire to grow and develop. This manager is stuck and somewhat oblivious to his situation. Other managers have been complaining about Jim, isolating him and by-passing him in decision making.

When I ask a managing director in this situation about his response to his team's complaints, and his own willingness to nurture a behaviour change, this is how the conversation might go:

MD: But I don't want to push him,(Jim), too hard

Consultant: Why not?

MD: If he ends up leaving he won't be easy to replace and it will mean more work for me and others. I am fully stretched at the moment and I am already feeling tired.

Consultant: This sounds to me like a leadership question. Are you willing to follow through on what's important for your workplace, or react based on your feelings - in this case fear, (real or otherwise),of more work? Are you wanting to demonstrate leadership to your team about how to deal with underperformers, or will you only do this at times when it won't come at a cost?

MD: OK I see your point. I will tackle the issue but will just go softly softly.

Consultant: I think you have been going softly softly to date and it hasn't been successful.

How about trying something different for a different result?

Obviously this is a performance management issue, (which I have covered in previous reports

[See Issues No. 7, 9 and 15](#)), but importantly, it is also a values issue. It is about walking the talk:

both for Jim and for the Managing Director. Otherwise your values have no 'value' at all. One deviation from them sends a clear message to all staff that 'we have different rules for different people'. I don't imagine that this is the message this MD truly wants to be sending his staff – particularly as both personally and professionally he values 'fairness' highly.

In this example the managing director is organising his actions around his feelings rather than around the values that he holds strongly. If you respond to your feelings (like anger, fear and guilt – and not to be confused with "gut feelings" that can provide you with useful information), without consideration

chances are that things will get worse and in some ways create the situation you fear most. In cases like the one above it might mean if you do nothing, (and hope it will all go away), this senior manager would feel so ostracised he may leave anyway - and often with a great deal of acrimony due to the way it has been handled. This would not only cause the obvious pressure on managing the now leaderless department, but often will leave a deep and festering scar on the culture of the organisation that may take years to heal. You might think I am being dramatic and alarmist but I assure you this observation is based on my experiences in the field.

I like the words of Peter Yates former chief executive of PBL, (in an address he gave not so long ago to a university graduation ceremony): "The feeling of hunger motivates you to eat, yet too much could cause you to be overweight or suffer ill health. If, however, you order your life around values and one of those is good health, then by acting upon this value – even though you might feel hungry – you will be less likely to be overweight."

In Conclusion

The message here is to keep the values of your organisation at the forefront of your decision making. That is the leadership way.

This is not say that you should always ignore your feelings of fear. Indeed acknowledge them and challenge yourself to move through them, not to succumb to them. All leaders will have felt fear walking into a particular meeting or a room and have said to themselves, "how am I going to do this?" ([See previous *be your best* report No. 3](#)) What great leaders do at this point is be clear about what their organisations value and behave in line with those values. They hold these values up like a beacon and when action is required the path they need to take appears and, importantly, is implemented with due consideration but without delay. I suggest that if you do this when confronted with dilemmas in your workplace, you will be more highly regarded as a leader and you will be more likely to become an employer of choice.

"Focus on what you want not on your feelings" **Rod Douglas**

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