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Return on Investment: Why Talking about Values Makes Sense

The story is familiar to anyone in technology: IT and business leaders clashing over how a project should progress. It happens all the time and causes project delays, overruns, conflict, and ill will. Sometimes these conflicts are due to miscommunication. Often, though, these conflicts stem from a deeper difference: that of values.

These days, most corporations list corporate values on their websites and marketing materials. Yet gaps between official values, the actual values of people in the organization, and daily actions can be great. Many leaders identify corporate values in closed rooms, without considering how their own values and those of employees fit into the conversation. The results range from lukewarm confirmation of values to outright rejection, disillusionment, and alienation.

Identifying corporate values is a good impulse since values guide our every decision, discussion, and action. They identify what matters most to us and, ideally, guide us through the complexities of everyday life.

Some make value differences a source of creative tension and energy. For example, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak built the first Apple computer in Jobs' bedroom and garage. They combined values of elegant engineering (Wozniak) and innovation (Jobs) to create a product that transformed the personal computing industry.

Yet many struggle to transform differences into mutual benefit. The following case study shows the struggle between two managers in a technology organization. We'll look at how their values guide behavior, cause conflict, and create gaps in understanding. Then, we'll explore the potential for values to help them negotiate agreement.

The Case Study: Conflict in the Meeting Room

Eleanor, project manager for the new portal release, knew the meeting wasn't going to be pretty. There had been problems and she expected that Ben, the business sponsor, would be upset. As she expected, Ben didn't waste any time: "I'm worried about how this project is proceeding," he said. "We've been at it for 5 months. We know that your new programmers are highly skilled, but they're impossible

to work with. They aren't responsive and they're alienating our business analysts."

Eleanor groaned inwardly. What Ben wasn't seeing was so important: his analysts were pestering the programmers constantly, asking them to cut corners in design, and make decisions that would decrease the program's quality. She replied, "Our concern is the same as yours: we want to produce a high quality product for our customers. Our programmers are trying to teach the business analysts so they understand the technical environment. But the analysts don't know enough and they just don't get it. It may be time to look at the skill levels of the analysts and upgrade."

As she spoke, she saw Ben's face flush, and noticed that he took a few deep breaths before responding. "Uh oh," she thought, "this is going to be a hard meeting."

Eleanor and Ben are operating from a classic difference in values. Let's start with Eleanor. From her reaction to Ben and the description of her thoughts, we learn:

- A. Eleanor believes that the analysts were "pestering the programmers," "asking them to cut corners in design," and "make decisions that would decrease the program's quality."
- B. Eleanor believes that she and Ben share a similar concern: producing a "high quality product for our customers."
- C. Eleanor says that the "programmers are trying to teach the business analysts."
- D. Eleanor believes that the "analysts don't know enough" and that "it may be time to look at the skill levels of the analysts and upgrade."

From these beliefs, thoughts, and words, we can deduce some of Eleanor's values. She believes that **quality** is important (A, B). She values **teaching** (C). By her dismay in the analysts' lack of technical understanding, we can infer that she values **knowledge** (D).

Ben, on the other hand, has a different perspective. From his dialogue, we learn:

- E. He believes that his group has been "trying to accommodate" the new programmers.

- F. Ben says that the new programmers are “highly skilled.”
- G. Ben believes that the new programmers are “impossible to work with.”
- H. He complains that “they aren’t responsive” and that “they’re alienating our business analysts.”

Again, we can deduce values from Ben’s conversation. His statement about “trying to accommodate” and his complaint that the programmers are “impossible to work with” (E, G, H) indicates a belief in **teamwork**. He acknowledges the programmers’ skill, which may represent his **knowledge** value, or may be a nod towards Eleanor’s knowledge value (F). His complaints in H indicate that **service** is important.

Assuming our analysis is true, Eleanor and Ben have at least one value in common (knowledge). Yet, their differing values of quality and teaching (Eleanor) and teamwork and service (Ben) cause a rift. This rift is further complicated by Eleanor’s assumption that both she and Ben value quality. On the surface, there’s little reason to argue with this statement. However, it seems that Ben (and, perhaps, his team) has other important values that are not being met.

Eleanor and Ben will continue to experience difficult conversations, slow resolution of conflicts, and disappointments in the others’ lack of understanding unless they can find a way to work together better.

The Case Study, Continued

Imagine if Eleanor and Ben had a way to talk about their values. They could combine their commitment to quality, engineering, performance, and service by creating a robust product that exceeds customer expectations. This is the payback from a successful values discussion: the ability to bring together different view in order to create a superior product or service. This is what can, and does happen, through conscious discussions about values.

Let’s assume that Eleanor and Ben both have identified their individual values and how those values influence their work. Now, let’s pick up their conversation where we left it.

“Uh oh,” she thought, “this is going to be a hard meeting.” But then she remembered that conversation they had had last week about values and had a flash of insight.

“Wait a second, Ben. Is this conversation hooking your ‘service’ value?”

“Yes, yes, it is!” he replied excitedly. “You understand. I’m frustrated: your programmers aren’t giving us the kind of service we need.”

“I get it,” Eleanor replied. “Our priority has always been quality. We hire programmers because they’re top notch coder, not because they have customer service skills. That’s why they’ve been complaining to me so much. They need uninterrupted time in order to do their work. If they can’t concentrate, they make mistakes.”

“The last thing I want is to receive buggy software,” Ben said. “That would hurt us in front of our clients. What if we found a way to give your programmers time to code but also be more responsive to us? Maybe we could set up ‘off-limits’ times that my people know are reserved for coding and ‘talk times’ which your coders know are reserved for talking with my people?”

This is just the beginning of the dialogue between Eleanor and Ben. It has a much greater chance of ending positively than the first conversation. With an understanding of values, Eleanor and Ben can clarify the core of the problem and identify ways to resolve the issue.

Of course, real-life situations rarely present or resolve as easily as those in case studies. To determine whether a values conversation could help you, consider these questions:

- Do you have a recurrent problem in a work relationship?
- Does the person’s perspectives and viewpoints continually frustrate you?
- Are the problems affecting your performance or your job satisfaction?
- Have other ways that you’ve tried to fix the relationship been unsuccessful?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, values may be at the root of your problem. Why not have a conversation about them and see if you too can reap the benefits of the values ROI?