

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Heroes Tell It All

by Dr. Mike Armour

Strong, resilient organizations always fly in "V-formation." That is, they never lose sight of Vision and Values.

Recently I was helping a group of top executives define the core values for their company. Integrity was on the list. Along with creativity, team spirit, and respect for the individual. As the TV detectives say, we had rounded up the usual suspects. About a dozen, in all.

"Okay," I said, "so these are your stated values. Are these the values that in fact shape your company?"

At first they all concurred, "Yes," they nodded in unison. Then, after a bit of reflection, they became more hesitant. Eventually they concluded, "Yes in some cases, no in others."

"So how would I determine what your actual values are?" I asked.

After they wrestled with that question for a while, I pointed them toward a telltale sign they had overlooked. "Do you have heroes in your company?" I queried. Again, everyone nodded. "Tell me about some of your company heroes."

Hero Stories

Over the next few minutes I heard a series of fascinating stories. Not only that. These stories had clearly been recounted time and again, for everyone knew the details. Without a doubt, these were the company's "hero stories."

I next inquired, "What values do these stories illustrate? What values did these people personify that made them heroes?" As answers began to fly, we compiled them into a list. Quickly we identified seven or eight common values in the hero stories. Interestingly, many values on this list were absent from the earlier list of core values. And vice versa.

I then pointed out that heroes become heroes because they embody the ideals and values of a culture. Thus, if you want to know the true values that permeate your organization, don't trust what you see in corporate handbooks. Or in conspicuously posted motivational messages. Or in the CEO's annual report.

Instead, just ask, "Who are the heroes here? And what makes them heroes?" Corporate "hero stories" will highlight the underlying values that govern your corporate culture.

These are the "living values" in the organization, as opposed to the values espoused in handbooks and annual reports.

Telling New Stories

Espoused values identify what we have agreed to cognitively. Hero stories reveal what we genuinely value. In a truly aligned organization, espoused values will be congruent with the ones that define corporate heroes. In non-aligned organizations, there may be little overlap between the two.

Efforts to define corporate values are usually a cognitive exercise. A compiling of ideals. Once compiled, these ideals are then announced, publicized, and incorporated into trainings, so that workers at every level become familiar with them. At least cognitively.

Cognitive acknowledgement, however, is not enough. Values assented to cognitively — and only cognitively — rarely trump values that are truly internalized in corporate culture. The result is a "disconnect" between stated core values and the values which in fact prevail.

How, then, do we overcome this "disconnect?" In part we do so with a new set of stories. We replace the old hero stories with new hero stories. In these new stories, heroes are workers who embody our espoused values.

Leadership must celebrate their stories in speeches, in internal communiqués, in recognition programs. These new heroes must come to personify what our company is about. They must be given their own wing in our hall of corporate heroes. The process will not bear fruit immediately. But over time its impact will be profound.

This strategy builds on a fundamental reality, namely, our nature as human beings to emulate heroes. Given that tendency, we can change people's behavior by changing their heroes. Giving them someone else to emulate.

New stories. New heroes. New values. A new corporate culture. That's it, in a nutshell

A SIDEBAR: Living Up To Values in Corporate America

USA Today recently published results of a poll taken of executives who attended The Conference Board's Business Ethics Conference. They were asked what happens to great performers in their company who do not live up to organizational values.

The most common response was to coach them (28.3%). Second most common was to tolerate them (23.3%). Penalizing them came in third (21.7%), followed by firing them (18.3%). Interestingly, 8.3% responded that the person would be promoted, even though he or she violated corporate values

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