



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Two wolves

Once upon a time, access to information, transportation and technology were limiting factors for most businesses. Labor was readily available, policy makers were decidedly in favor of economic growth, and the environment was relatively free of activism and bureaucratic red tape. Commodities were king, business models were built on two factors — increasing productivity and lowering production costs.

However, as Robert Gallagher so eloquently stated: “Change is inevitable — except from a vending machine.”

Values create excellence

History reminds us that relentless focus is core to the performance of businesses. The challenge lies in attaining focus in the midst of the noise, chaos, shiny-object technologies and the emotionally charged speed of communication that characterizes contemporary life. Frustration and cynicism are not surprising outcomes in the current environment.

However, these are not the only possibilities. There is another path, one paved on the clarity of identifying core values, defining the purpose and mission of people and organizations, and developing the discipline to align behavior and decisions with values and purpose.

This sounds too simple to be true. However, business thought leaders are increasingly in consensus that progress, growth and health of organizations depends on their ability to define and live a set of nonnegotiable values that provide foundational underpinnings for people to create excellence. Clarity around values provides the guideposts for how the company will do business and which people it will attract.

At the core

Not long ago, I was working with a set of company leaders, and it was clear from the outset that their interest was to focus time on tactics — also known as “what a business does.” As the conversation progressed, it was clear that there was going to be a fair bit of disagreement about the “what.”

As we probed, it became obvious that the group was not operating from a shared sense of values, so we pushed them into a conversation about their shared principles by asking the most senior leader to share a story about the company that was so important that it should be shared with every member



of the company both now and in the future.

He sat back in thought and then shared a story that was characterized by grit, determination, and the development of respect and trust. As he concluded, the tears began to stream down his face. What followed was a deep and meaningful discussion and consensus-building process to define the guiding principles of the organization.

From the moment that the leader had the courage to share the deep purpose of the business, the tenor of the meeting changed. The team dove into the process of clarifying their core values and, as a result, discovered that two of their biggest hurdles hinged on either a process or person that was not aligned with those values.

Narrowing the list

Gino Wickman, author of *Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business*, offers an effective process for getting at the core values of an organization. Ask each member of the leadership team to write down the names of the three people in the organization that, if they could be replicated, would lead the

company to a place of dominance (smaller organizations can consider individuals outside the company).

Once the list of folks is assembled, move quickly to a discussion of what favorable characteristics or traits are embodied by each and write down all the descriptors and adjectives used. The list should be fairly long, so whittle it down to the top 10-15 by keeping those that are mission critical, erasing those that are peripheral, and merging those that are comparable. Wickman states that the next step is where the really tough work gets done. Narrow the list down to no more than seven, with a strong preference for a list of three to five.

It is important to then put the list aside for three to four weeks before bringing everyone back to determine if the list is on point. Remember that those who weren't directly involved in the process will need to have stories and other creative mechanisms that accompany the list so that they can understand the context of each.

When the process is complete, you and your team will have created the framework and the legends that will guide the organization forward. The core values should guide personnel decisions, joint ventures, customer discovery and behavior.

As Wickman reminds us, the key is to define, communicate and embody the values.

To illustrate the importance, let me share a Cherokee story about a conversation between a grandfather and his grandchild concerning the mysteries of life:

“There are two wolves at war in each of us — one who represents truth, beauty, kindness, joy and wisdom; the other represents distrust, cynicism, self-centeredness, hatred and anger.”

After a long pause, the child asked a simple question: “Grandfather, which one wins?”

The grandfather softly answered: “My child, the one you feed.”

Which wolf will you feed?

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