

Are Your OD Efforts Change-Driven or Values-Driven?

by Ken Hultman

Ken Hultman leads off with a helpful reminder about keeping values in the driver's seat. He differentiates between values-driven change and change-driven values and suggests some ways for OD practitioners to help organizations avoid taking short-term actions that could jeopardize their longer term vision and values.

Values are standards of importance based on underlying beliefs. As criteria for making decisions and setting priorities, values are meant to be considered before taking action, not afterwards. Values should be held in mind as options are being considered to insure that the organizational ideology is always preserved and enhanced. Nevertheless, it's common knowledge that many organizations allow change to drive values rather than the other way around. This is true even though extensive research over the past 20 years has shown consistently that values-driven organizations outperform others by a wide margin. Change-driven values inevitably lead to short-sighted decisions that jeopardize long-term success. The differences between change-driven values and values-driven change are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Change-Driven Values or Values-Driven Change?	
<i>Change-Driven Values</i>	<i>Values-Driven Change</i>
Reactive	Proactive
Emphasis on damage control	Emphasis on forward movement, growth
Problems	Opportunities
Focus on the urgent	Focus on the crucial
Short-term perspective	Long-term perspective
Narrow-minded, insular view	Open-minded, broad view
Anxiety-driven	Mission, vision-driven
Emotional, impulsive	Rational, deliberate
Expedient criteria	Established criteria
Imposed, stakeholders unaligned	Participatory, stakeholders aligned
Uncertainty, confusion	Confidence in direction, outcomes

An organization can be considered values-driven if a systematic effort has been made to:

1. Select organizational values according to objective criteria

2. Define the values behaviorally
3. Embed the values in key management systems, such as employee selection, day-to-day supervision, performance evaluation, the reward system, and training
4. Remain committed to the values when under pressure

It would be hard to overstate the relevance of this issue for OD practitioners, who play a key role in helping organizations change in ways that support movement toward vision. If OD interventions are being driven by immediate circumstances instead of values, however, this could result in short-term decisions that unwittingly work against vision.

This challenge is especially daunting now, because many organizations are fighting for their survival. The pressures to be change-driven are often overwhelming, like being caught in a vortex. Nevertheless, we all know that anxiety creates tunnel-vision and interferes with rational decision-making. When the pressure-cooker whistles, therefore, cool heads are needed to insure that organizations don't win the battle only to lose the war. OD practitioners have both a professional and morale obligation to be among those cool heads. You can make an important contribution by standing back from the immediate situation, taking a holistic view, and looking for ways the organization can stay focused on values-driven change. Here are a few suggestions:

- If your organization doesn't have clearly defined organizational values, offer to facilitate a process where values will be identified and defined.
- Values should be defined behaviorally. This is done by asking such questions as, "If someone were acting on the values, what would they be doing?" and "What would they refrain from doing?" The defining behaviors for values can then be used as the basis for specific interventions and change strategies.
- Never provide a retreat, training program, or other intervention simply because a manager asks for it. Over the decades, this practice has undermined the credibility of OD and HRD, giving them the reputation of being reactive and providing the "flavor of the month." Instead, always ask how the intervention would affirm one or more organizational values and foster movement toward vision.
- Link your training programs directly to organizational values, and reinforce this linkage in verbal and written statements about the offerings. Done consistently, this practice embeds the connections between specific learning objectives and more inclusive values in the mind of your internal/external customers. Not only will this strengthen commitment to organizational values, but it will decrease the chances of your programs being axed during times of belt-tightening.
- Values are only words unless they're embedded in culture, and this simply won't happen without your initiative and active support. Embedding values is a learning process, and all efforts to do this should be consistent and reinforce the same basic message. Frequently internal competition and power struggles prevent this from happening. Therefore, it's important to coordinate your efforts with those of other stakeholders, such as operations, HR, suppliers, and customers.
- Follow-up with customers to assess the outcomes from your programs and services. This practice provides additional opportunities to champion and reinforce organizational values.

- Finally, walk the talk. You're still an OD practitioner even when you're not facilitating assessment and change efforts. Every interaction is an opportunity to model and reinforce the organization's values. Your efforts in this regard will help bring about greater alignment between espoused and actual organizational values, which is a process of continuous improvement.

OD practitioners are the guardians of organizational values. Owning this responsibility takes courage, however, especially when actions being touted by top management pose a threat to values. While at times you may feel like a "voice crying out in the wilderness," your persistence will pay off when the organization affirms values-driven change over change-driven values. Ultimately, this could be the difference between success and failure.

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