

Value Judgments

Writing our Values: A Double Edged Sword?

By Kate Dempsey, PhD.

© September 2006

It is commonplace nowadays for businesses, government and not-for-profit organisations to have written statements of values. While this may seem like a good idea, it has a few pitfalls that boards should be aware of.

Why should we have written values?

There has been some momentum in recent years for not-for-profits to emulate the corporate world and prepare values statements. Writing values may seem to be straightforward, especially as not-for-profit groups are generally well connected to the values they want to espouse. Engagement with values is the means those in the sector use to determine if their programs and services are furthering their common values. Not-for-profit programs are the testing of values. Articulating values has the advantage of positioning a not-for-profit in the 'market', in other words it clearly advertises what it stands for and whom it serves. Value statements help people (including staff) to connect with the aims of the organisation.

Value statements don't protect us from the messiness of life

The main problem with writing value statements is that people hope they will bring an organisation together and resolve underlying tensions. This is unrealistic. A value statement is a double-edged sword because it may hide as much as it reveals, and what is hidden has more potential to cause trouble. If there is unresolved conflict between key parties within the organisation, then value statements can, paradoxically, have the effect of burying that conflict and there is no easy way to address the underlying tension. In addition, there are often conflicts between values *themselves* and by articulating values we can bring that conflict into sharper focus in our attempts to put the values into practice.

It is one thing to write a list of values, it is another thing entirely to try to put them into practice. If we look closely, we see that in practising one value wholeheartedly, we may compromise our capacities with another. For example, maintaining client confidentiality may compromise transparency in decision-making; innovative practice may not accommodate efficient management of resources. This is the reality of value conflict that is seldom discussed. It may be detrimental to the service of one value if we promote another. To pretend that writing a (long) list of values will resolve these conflicts is misguided.

So my first 'golden rule' in writing value statements is to take the time to think about why your Board wants to go down this route and to spend time carefully planning the process you want to adopt for articulating values in the organisation.

Engage people in the process

If you decide that having a statement of values is the way to go for your Board, then be aware of the inherent conflictual nature of values and indeed the likely conflict between organisational values, the personal values of members of your team, your staff and with the values of the larger society. Remember that naming values will not resolve problems and may in fact bury them and naming values that do not coincide with current social values can increase tension in the organisation. For example your Board may want to espouse the importance of partnerships or co-

operative effort. Yet your agency only survives by competing with similar agencies for government funding. Be prepared to talk this through and avoid the trap of pleasing all stakeholders by simply listing more and more values. I have seen values lists in organisations that run to over 20 values. How can anyone live up to such a list?

Boards need to work hard to really engage people in the process, and yes, this takes time. I have worked with Boards wanting to ‘drill down the values in the organisation’. They ask why isn’t it working? When I talk to staff I find the process has left them feeling ‘screwed to the mat’. I have also worked with management teams who have asked me to design a process for ‘rolling out the values.’ Upon deeper investigation it seems that this language has left stakeholders feeling steam-rolled! As a part of the process, there is a need to include reflection on any underlying tensions and on how the conflict between values will be discerned in particular contexts, and resolved.

Values as motherhood statements

Many organisations have specific values written already: popular ones are honesty, integrity, respect and fairness. Another popular one is social justice. But what do these really mean in practice? While they are lofty sentiments that we can agree with, they are not the be all and end all. Boards would do well to choose 3 or 4 key values for which they intend to demonstrate action. You do not need to cover all possible values; or try to be all things to all people. This inevitably leads to cynicism and failure. The Australian Public Service (APS) has values written into the *Public Service Act 1999*. It has some 15 values, including the ‘value’ that the APS has the highest ethical standards and the ‘value’ that the APS values communication.

Try not to confuse values with behaviours

Values are intrinsic standards to be upheld. They are end points in themselves. A value is a principle, a standard, or quality that is considered worthwhile or desirable. Values may be underpinned by behaviours that demonstrate them, but they are not the same as behaviours. For example ‘teamwork’ might more correctly be described as a means of achieving the value of loyalty, but one public sector organisation has cited both teamwork and loyalty as values in its annual report.

The temptation is to list everything, to use jargon phrases and to include concepts without thinking through what a value may actually entail. For example, ‘listening and responding to the community’ would seem more like an action, a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Yet this is a popular value among local government authorities. Perhaps their Council’s could ask themselves: why do we need to listen and respond? The answer may provide the value they are looking for. The meaning behind the lists of values is sometimes lacking, as is a recognition that the values may sometimes be in conflict in everyday applications. In some cases the values espoused are hard to grasp and hard to measure.

Make sure your intent is clear

When values are articulated to serve some other purpose, then those values are instrumental. The business world sometimes sees values not as intrinsic but as serving another purpose. It is as if profit-making companies are asking: ‘will we increase market share if we promote values?’ ‘Will we appear trustworthy if we have a value statement?’

Take these two examples from the corporate world:

Phillip Morris (cigarette manufacturer)

For us economic performance is not the only measure of our success. Honesty, integrity and social responsibility are just as important to the way we measure ourselves.

Coca Cola

Our Code of Business Conduct serves to guide the actions of our employees, officers and directors in ways that are consistent with our core values: honesty; integrity; diversity; quality; respect; responsibility; and, accountability.

Coca-Cola uses the word accountability. It raises the question: accountable to whom? Accountable for what purpose? If Coca-Cola is accountable to shareholders principally, which is the duty of any corporation, then integrity and quality could be compromised in some instances.

Remember that staff, clients and stakeholders can 'smell' dishonesty a mile off. My experience suggests that the real measure of the power of value statements is how the Board and the management team display the values themselves. Staff and clients look to the leaders in the organisation to 'walk the talk'. It is important therefore to choose carefully, start small, build slowly and be aware that values must always be demonstrated: you must show them rather than tell them. This fact leaves Boards vulnerable to a perceived failure of values. It is hard to live up to a shopping list of values all the time, when compromise and conflict are necessarily part of life.

Southern Health has articulated a clear statement of values within a nifty motto. The motto is *I care*. Each letter stands for a value:

Integrity
Compassion
Accountability
Respect
Excellence

In my view this is a good attempt at articulating the values of a health service. Although I note that accountability is there again. I wonder if accountability is a value or a means to an end. I also worry that staff may find living up to the *I Care* motto very difficult to do at all times. I am not sure how Southern Health intends to nurture and strengthen the values inside the organisation, but that is critical to consider.

So is it worth doing?

Articulating organisational values can be a powerful means of unifying a group, getting clarity on priorities, advertising what you are on about to your constituents or clients. Values are at the heart of not-for-profit organisations. So yes, I say it is a worthwhile exercise. But be aware of the traps and snares along the way. There is no substitute for a slow engagement with the task and a genuine acknowledgement of our human frailties as we go down the path.