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Confessions of a Core Values Convert (I Thought Mission Statements were Stupid)

My name is Matt Kirchner and I am a Core Values Convert.

Before my conversion, I thought Mission Statements and Core Values were useless. They belonged on the long list of pathetic ideas borne of consultants who lived in an abstract business

world where the theoretical trumps the pragmatic and everything always works out exactly as planned. Before my conversion, I viewed Mission Statements and Core Values as items stuck on the wall in the lobby or on the web site to serve the purpose of letting the whole world know how forward thinking and progressive executive management was.

In fact, many if not most organizations' Core Values and Mission Statements serve little more purpose than the one described above. Sure, the company's president can recite them, as can the rest of executive management. Some other team members might be able to as well. But that is usually where it ends. If the Mission Statement and Core Values are not the principals that actively guide the organization and do not become an integral part of its culture, they are useless. So what led to my conversion?

In a metal finishing operation, the world comes pretty fast. Lead times are miniscule. Customers are constantly changing priorities. Chemistry related quality problems can't wait until tomorrow. When equipment malfunctions, any delay can have potentially devastating effects on performance. A poor decision on the part of an employee can result in major unfavorable consequences because there is virtually no time to alter the outcome before it affects the customer.

On several occasions during the last year I questioned the decisions made by some of our team members. After digging deeper, I concluded at times our employees lacked clear criteria against which they could weigh their alternatives and decide on a course of action. Rather than blaming them, I blamed myself and our executive management team for a lack of clarity in setting our priorities.

Not long after I came to this conclusion, a colleague recommended the book *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive: A Leadership Fable* by Patrick Lencioni. This easy read, much of which is

written in the form of a fictional story, details the importance of communicating organizational clarity. Lencioni professes that organizations must answer the following questions. "Why does the Organization Exist, and What Difference Does It Make in the World?" (Mission Statement) and "What Behavioral Values are Irreplaceable and Fundamental?" (Core Values). In reading this book, I realized these were what our people were missing.

I recently spent some time discussing Mission and Core Values with Tim Pappas, a principal with Pappas Delaney, LLC, a Midwestern firm that provides business development and transition advisory services.

Pappas believes that Mission and Core Values are only important to the extent that the chief executive drives behavior that is consistent with them. The point is, if the leader of the organization isn't going to walk the walk, the Mission Statement and Core Values exercise will not only be a waste of time, it will be counter-productive.

An entire recipe for the formulation of a Mission Statement and Core Values is well outside the scope of this column, but I asked Pappas where an organization should start. According to him, there are three key steps to drafting an organization's Mission Statement and Core Values.

First, he believes that the session at which the Mission and Core Values are formulated should include a cross section of the organization's people. He speaks disparagingly of the idea of sending the executive team off to some posh resort only for the team to descend from the mountain and deliver the Mission Statement and Core Values to its awaiting subjects.

Second, according to Pappas, it is best—but not imperative—that the session at which Mission and Core Values are derived be facilitated by an external third party.

Finally, he says that the CEO should listen and be the final arbitrator of conflict rather than offer opinions, thereby allowing the Core Values to flow from the organization's people and increasing the degree to which they buy in.

Could your organization use a little more clarity? Consider drafting or reinvigorating your Mission Statement and Core Values? Once part of your culture, they can be used at all levels of the organization to weigh priorities, make decisions and set corporate strategy.

Less than six months after my conversion, our company is already reaping the benefits.

