

**REAGENT**

Employer Marketing

REAGENT RANT NO.6



**VALUES**

**WHAT ARE  
THEY WORTH?**

JULY 2011



# values

My laptop screen is covered in latte.

I couldn't help it, it just gushed out and now I have a beige and frothy MacBook Air.

The reason for this involuntary beveragey expulsion was a recruitment ad proudly explaining the company's values by laying out a word vertically down the side of the ad, and against each letter was the value starting with that letter.

It's unfair to single out exactly who the company is, as there are plenty of organisations that deserve to be outed, but I'm sure you're with me in recognising this odd practice, which someone has clearly deemed to be a great idea.

To protect the innocent, let's pretend it was:

- T**eamwork
- R**ight first time
- I**nnovate
- P**ride
- E**nergy

And if their creative juices were really cascading, they'll put the Copywriter's Last Resort on the end:

**TRIPE!**

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Now, I'll attempt to follow the thought process that leads organisations to believe that this is a good idea:

1. A4 laminated sheets with the company's Values on it start sprouting in boardrooms and receptions across the country.
2. Leadership teams get Value Envy, and dictate that 'we need Values too'.
3. They dictate these values to their EA, who then tells HR to make everyone in the company start abiding by them. By Christmas. Or else.
4. And if they don't they will no longer be welcome in the company (unless they're one of the top-performers, in which case they'll turn a blind eye).
5. Except people don't recognise these values (because they are a figment of the leaders' imagination, or a Corporate Fantasy) so we must make them recognise them.
6. We turn them into a word. A word that everyone knows. And one that is inspiring, and evocative, and makes people behave a certain way by the outstanding clarity of its structure and sheer creative brilliance in the way it is formed from those values.
7. Yes. They are our own Tablets from the mountain.
8. How can the staff resist such a visionary and inspiring call to action?

Well, oddly enough they seem to manage it. They become cynical towards their employer for trying to beat certain behaviour out of them.

They resist (unless they're American of course) because cynicism towards tyrannical or manipulative behaviour is a natural reaction in Aussies. And Poms (but only quietly and after asking for permission and queuing up for a decent while).

They obviously play the corporate card and pretend to respect the Values (to do otherwise is like telling everyone the CEO's new kid looks like Winston Churchill, as all babies do) but inside they are railing against what they see as an attempt to brainwash them.

Their behaviour changes. Whereas before they might naturally and willingly have acted in the spirit of TRIPE!, they now see themselves as being forced to comply through behavioural dictation.

They stop doing it, only to have a stern warning at their next performance review that they are 'not aligned'.

Now don't get me wrong, I love values. Love 'em. The sort of unspoken values that you use to decide who you hire, who you reject, what behaviour you look for in people, what traits your clients will respect and be attracted to, and will ultimately drive the fulfilment of your organisation's consumer proposition. The values we used to wrap up in the word 'culture'.

But these are naturally-occurring characteristics of people, like a sense of whimsy, an anal addiction to perfection, a desperate willingness to please, the desire to under-promise and over-deliver, hating things out of place, and a sense of urgency. They are the things we choose our friends by, our spouses by, who we sit next to at dinner and who we lend our treasured possessions to. They are the things we hope we will pass on to our children during the 20 years (and rising) they stay in our care.

But Values are something quite different, almost sinister in their intent and clumsy in their execution.

They are weapons to be used retrospectively by the company to fix what has clearly been a mistake – to reject, reprimand, re-adjust or remove.

The laughable thought that making a word out of these dictates will hide their purpose or persuade people that they are some sort of magical mirror reflecting the way we work, is little more than delirium.

But organisations need values to succeed don't they? Because a 'value vacuum' is just anarchy, isn't it?

The answer to that is perhaps for another article, but I'll finish with a little exercise. And please don't cheat, or I'll stop your subscription...

1. Without looking, write down all the Values of your organisation
2. Now, how many did you get right?
3. OK. Of the Values, write down an example of when you last displayed that Value
4. Write down examples of when your CEO and/or leadership displayed those Values publicly
5. Show how the Values are measured and rewarded amongst employees
6. Show how the Values are used in the recruitment process

OK, OK. You probably got half way through and gave up. That's fine – you're not alone. There are others like you, you know.

There is little you can do immediately to fix this, so don't try as it will probably backfire on you (you will be playing with deep-seated leadership beliefs here).

Perhaps start with what I have done here, which is to use a small 'v' when talking about the values that exist naturally in the organisation, and use a big 'V' for those that the company is trying to shoe-horn in.

You'll soon start to identify what are the true behaviours around you, and which are those displayed under duress.

And then perhaps go find the budget to uncover your true EVP, and get some help from the professionals....

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