



# Coffee Break

A communiqué from Edelman to engage the grey matter over a mid morning coffee

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## The Diminishing Worth of Corporate Values?

The clarion call of corporate values has faded to a feeble squeak. Ten years ago values were welcomed in the workplace as evidence of a corporate heart beating somewhere above the bottom line. Now the average employee yawns politely when the latest iteration is trotted out on walls, screen savers and coffee mugs. The reality is, corporate values mantras don't cut it anymore. Too many corporate giants have fallen short – internally and publicly. The well-shuffled deck of integrity, respect and teamwork has been redistributed too often. More and more, the values are reminiscent of behavioural competencies most of us mastered in kindergarten.

The rationale for promulgating values is alignment of the vision “where we want to be” with the business strategy “what we'll do” and the behaviour ‘how we'll do it’. And there are still plenty of companies achieving solid alignment with the business focus. They get it right by listening well and leading well. They listen to and involve their people in articulating culture; and they directly link the aspirational with the strategic – providing real meaning rather than motherhood.

Our advice to senior managers who dream the impossible dream of “getting our people to live the values” is to stop and rethink.

In our years of talking with employees across a wide range of companies, every person from the factory floor to the boardroom has been able to articulate the cultural attributes they value in their organisation. Core values still sit at the heart of organisational culture; they only become corny when they're imposed from above and don't truly reflect what employees intuitively understand and value.

Our advice? Don't attempt to define your company's values without consulting your own people. The result won't ring true.

Another thing we've learnt is that people in the workforce are generally honest, ethical, polite with customers and colleagues, and take pride in doing their job well. They're understandably miffed when senior management implies otherwise by imposing etiquette guides masquerading as values.

Our advice? Trust your people. They might, in turn, come to trust you.

The values imperative now is for companies to build (and in many cases rebuild) trust, not by trotting out lists of values concocted at management off-sites, but by clearly articulating what lies at the bedrock of their business: “What do we truly believe and what will we stand by?”

A fat PR budget won't buy trust – or credibility. Edelman CEO Richard Edelman highlights the need for trust and management involvement, based on research presented at the 2004 World Economic Forum at Davos<sup>1</sup>. In the conference publication, *Global Agenda*, he cites employees – and their friends and family – as a company's most credible messengers, with a credibility rating far ahead of chief executives. “Employees,” Edelman says, “are the key audience for CEOs seeking to build effective corporate reputation, because great companies today are constructed from the inside out.”<sup>2</sup>

Our advice? Get back to basics with the people at the grass roots of the business. They will tell you what makes the culture robust – and where the weaknesses really lie.



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## References

<sup>1</sup> The Edelman Trust Barometer: annual survey of 1200 opinion leaders in Brazil, China, France, Germany, UK, and the U.S on institutions, brands, information sources and spokespeople

<sup>2</sup> 'Managing corporate risk and reputation' Richard Edelman, *Global Agenda* World Economic Forum conference publication, 2004

### When values no longer cut it: the building blocks for alignment

1. A clear picture of the core of the business – its purpose, strengths and culture – developed by involving all stakeholders, especially employees
2. An aspirational and achievable vision, articulated by business leaders with a map of the journey and process
3. Business priorities and strategies communicated with relevance to people's day-to-day work by a trusted source – preferably team managers
4. Leading by example – people watch the leaders closely, and adopt their behaviour
5. Continual cross-organisational involvement and communication – especially ensuring a healthy flow of communication to management

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## About Edelman's Employee Engagement Practice

Edelman's value-add aligns all internal and external communication, ensuring commentary is in sync with business and marketing activity. We focus on ensuring people in front line management understand their role and are able to support any initiative through intelligent dialogue with their people.

Edelman works with client organisations to accelerate acceptance of change, to ensure our clients' people understand their business priorities and are actively engaged in helping realise them. Solutions can be tailored to provide a flexible communication program that supports rapid change and embeds a strong and responsive change competency in client organisations.

We can help organisations when:

- There is an external program requiring strong internal support
- Internal communication needs refreshing or a refocus
- The business is poised for, or undergoing, change and you need your people with you
- Two-way organisational communication is suffering

We work collaboratively with clients to identify employee engagement needs and priorities, and to develop a framework for action. Our program design and delivery uses a strong project management discipline, and can be either hands-on or consultative, depending on our clients' needs and in-house capacity.

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