

# VALUES That Work

Text by A/Prof Jason Yap

Organisations are made up of people, and people can have very different beliefs, values, personalities, preferences and behaviours. How then do we speak of the values of an organisation? Would this be the sum (or the net) of all the diverse personalities, or does an organisation have a life and ethic of its own, just as it is also in many ways a “person” under the law?

Can we believe the corporate values on display, or must we delve deeper into the organisational soul of the rank and file, or of the professional groupings within? Ultimately, we find that the organisation’s ethos lie not in what people say or even think, but in what they do; in this regard, it is the leaders who must show the way.

## Ethos

Organisations espouse communal and shared values proudly displayed on corporate walls and websites that they would like to think is their spirit or ethos. These values are related to their mission and vision, or sometimes to their founder. Healthcare organisations cannot do without Compassion and Excellence. Throughout the years, some phrases have arisen – some then fading – as must-have values, like Customer-focused, Knowledge-based, and most recently, Innovation.

For many, organisational ethics are the ethics or ethos that should be espoused by organisations, and they guide how organisations ought to behave and make decisions. For those in charge, there is the added dimension of how values and ethics can drive their mission and the way it is achieved. Others consider also how individuals ought to behave at work, especially when their own

ethics do not align well with those of their corporations.

These are important considerations because people, however well-meaning and passionate, have different ideas of what actions are right, both ethically and operationally, and working together can tax even the most amiable and amenable of friendships. In healthcare, one of the most complex workplaces, these alignments can be critical.

## Values

Ultimately, ethics of any sort are based on a set of values, whether formally stated or intuitively grasped. Ethics is about what “ought” to be done, and that “ought-ness” rests on a value system, which is held as axiomatically correct and necessary, in effect as virtues.

Gus Lee, author of an insightful book entitled *Courage*,<sup>1</sup> describes three types of core values.

First, there are the values that actually happen on the ground: what observers and participants can see and possibly manifest every day at work. These include nasty stuff like interdepartmental strife, mindless bureaucracy and unreasoning competition – values that senior management would not happily own up to having, but nonetheless need to acknowledge, because they are in fact real and must be dealt with.

Then there are the many values that festoon corporate walls: Teamwork, Customer Focus, Passion, Compassion, and even Professionalism. But as Gus Lee points out in his book, “Enron displayed superlative teamwork

in paper-shredding, while Arthur Anderson was wonderfully customer-focused in their support”, not all good-sounding values are sufficient in and of themselves.

At the pinnacle lie just three special values: Integrity, Character, and – Gus Lee’s focus in his book – Courage. These values are different not in intensity or impact but in their very nature. They are “otherly-oriented” and determine the organisation’s mission (“Why do we do this?”), while the others are merely useful in the achievement of the said mission (“How shall we do it together?”).

The insight that Gus Lee’s illuminating book shows us is that not all values are created equal. There are higher-order values that shape *what* we do, and there are other values that merely shape *how* we do what we do. We can, as organisations, do very well what we ought *not* to be doing. We must also recognise that there may exist values that are real, even if unwanted, and pretending they do not exist will not cause them to *disappear*.<sup>2</sup>

## Professionalism

Some readers might have been surprised at the inclusion of Professionalism in the second tier (though I did say “even”). Should it not automatically be in the top tier, as the high order value that guides the entire profession?

In Lewis Carrolls’ *Alice in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty said: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” To which Alice replies: “The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

*Professionalism* is one such much-abused word. It could denote a paid service, a livelihood, quality that meets expectations, or a set of high-prestige occupations (bankers, accountants, lawyers, engineers, doctors), some of which society allows to self-regulate. For the last group, “doing their best” is not enough; they must also perform to the standards of their peers, or suffer their judgement and consequences. Professionalism falls outside the top tier not because it is in itself not good enough, but in that people often settle for a weakly brewed substitute.

Professionalism allows conscientious objectors to abstain from practices they personally consider unacceptable. We respect those who stand by their principles, even on principles we do not agree with, more than others who act against their own consciences. But what we admire here is not Professionalism itself but Integrity, Character and Courage.

### Praxis

There is much divergence when one considers what organisations would do for success. For some, it might simply be enough that one does not break the law; anything not explicitly proscribed is fair game. Others insist that personal ethics – nurtured on religious or humanitarian grounds – must remain a higher order. We have found out several times in the past decades, from Enron to Lehman, that what organisations do that is not ethical can have far-reaching consequences.

Unfortunately, too many people simply might not care. What the organisation – that large vague thing that pays our salaries – does is beyond us, and we salve our consciences with the thought that so long as we are not the ones with our hands *in the blood*, our consciences are clear. Then we must return to Integrity, Character and Courage, or the lack thereof.

### Community

To deliberately set out their ethical principles, organisations publish written codes of ethics and standards (much like what the Singapore Medical Council has produced for medical practitioners), provide training in ethical behaviour for their employees, provide advisory services for those in need of guidance, and set up reporting mechanisms for breaches of conduct. Most of us would be able to recognise the parallels within our own places of work.

The above are predicated on individual ethics, with a focus on how individuals ought to act. There should also be the sense of communal responsibilities. This goes beyond how, for example, we ought to act towards our colleagues or our clients. Organisations, in their corporate policies, informal practices and cultural milieu, do have a life beyond the individual.

Not all unethical practices within organisations originate from individual misdeeds. Public sector organisations can strive for their own organisational glory when they should be supporting other organisations that are better placed to serve the population. HR policies can unjustly treat staff differentially, financial policies can take unfair advantage of vendors, business operations can callously damage the environment, and corporate strategies can selfishly cause hurt to society. These “ought-nots” are more often than not set up by well-meaning people who did not anticipate the inadvertent side-effects.

### Leadership

Beyond basic compliance with the law, organisations must foster cultures that encourage and reward exemplary behaviour. However, such an integrity-based approach would be fatally wounded if the leaders themselves do not provide

appropriate role models. Too many of us can recount times when the leaders demonstrate that they think themselves to be above the conduct they require of others.

Whether deliberately or not, it is the role of leaders to ensure that the organisation does what is right, not just for the organisation or their clients but for society as a whole.

Ultimately, even though organisations do have a life of their own, it is the responsibility of the leaders firstly to define, develop, and maintain the ethics of the organisation, and more importantly, to demonstrate and model it. The buck stops at their desk. ♦

### References

1. Lee G, Elliot-Lee D. *Courage: The Backbone of Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 2006.
2. All seven books and eight movies about the life and adventures of Harry Potter.

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