

Out of your former company's values, which one are you still adopting/practicing ?

by Giovanna Combatti

One of the interesting dynamics we wanted recently to tap into, referred to what was happening to people and values they used to live with at former organizations.

Especially by "cult like" companies the immersion in organizational values looks quite significant. So I wondered what was happening to people after leaving those so involving environments: do they tend to find some other similar environments with similar values? Should those values be different in their later companies, how did people manage to make such a change in behaviors, in their relational skills, in communication, etc?

We ran recently an exercise by asking former employees of a cult like company, out of former company's value which one were they still adopting.

This is what we could find out:

One guy after working in R&D at former company returned to doing academic research. In his previous organization, he reported the principles were:

- "all in the same boat"
- Belief in the individual
- power of small teams
- Long term view

"It is not as much as what we practice as it is what our new employer practices and how they practice it. Definitely in an academic institution the principle of "all in the same boat" is not very clearly defined/practiced. So I guess it is all about the "belief in the individual". The "long term view" is an individual principle related to where do you want your research to be in several years. At the level of the university the long term view is often defined but rarely implemented and it only affects specific departments. "The power of small teams" refers to each faculty laboratory which forms a small team. When it comes to forming small teams of several faculty investigators, it is hard here to build a real team spirit.

An HR made the point that she felt it is impossible to ignore any of the four principles of her previous company. "They are in productive tension with each other. It is like a table, all four legs must be equal to have a stable platform. If you view a situation and not consider the impact of all of the four principles, you will not reach as good an outcome."

Meaning that it seems extremely difficult to change a mindset or deep beliefs or behaviours adopted in an organization, seen as a whole.

Another manager added to the discussion another point:

in his previous company one of the values was "freedom to grow" and "waterline: don't make a hole under the waterline on a boat". "I still practice all of previous principles and agrees that they work as a set. Even in very different firms with different cultures, I find them applicable. The hardest value for people in other firms to grasp is freedom, which gets confused with the watered down concept of empowerment. The polarity with waterline is a critical dynamic for this principle, and I have taught that principle verbatim in my current organization, for example, to illustrate what "empowerment" really means.

An Executive & Marketing Leader said that his previous company's principles act together differently in different cultures.: "The r principles are universal. Well developed freedom is a precursor to excellence in innovation, at least from my observations. However, if there is not some type of boundary or waterline, freedom can be paralyzing or dangerous. People need to know the bounds of their freedom as well as have a good understanding of the effect of their actions on others."

Another manager reported that two principles in his former company were fairness and commitment. "I adopt them in all of my dealings - whether at work or in other organizations or at home. If you are not fair, we need to effect a change. If you are not committed, why are you here?"

A few more perspectives:
 "These former principles are a personal base for me. I try to apply them in all of my dealings and mentor others to use them for guiding their actions."

An Information Technology Director added that he still practices all of his previous company values. "After almost 14 years with previous company, I feel they've become part of my professional persona." "When I started in my present position, I created a list of my expectations for my staff and therefore the IT department, which incorporates these principals to one extent or another, even if not in those same words. Some of my staff weren't quite ready to believe that these were actually my expectations, but over time, I think they've come to realize that I do indeed expect them to adhere to the list, and that I practice them myself. We've had some great successes when my staff felt empowered to try to solve a problem in a unique, unproven way.

Another HR manager added that former values lived at former organization "became part of me and they continue to impact my behaviour and way of thinking.

I find, all of them make all efforts and actions extremely powerful, also in other organizations and cultures. I see companies where management doesn't consider that value at all, does not expect people to take their commitments. In those environments you cannot expect to have people who aim to take own commitments and to grow by increasing their commitment level.

"For me it became a life-style around 15 years ago, and still is. But these are hard, hard concepts to introduce to a new workplace 'bottom-up'" added another manager.

An interesting point was then raised by an HR specialist who said that although she moved from former cult-like but still medium sized company to a very large organization about two years and a half ago, she finds that she still thinks in terms of former principles when making decisions and explaining them to others. "Additionally, we had a change at the top of our business and have been working to influence a shift in the culture-- again, I find that using these principles as a guiding tool has been extremely helpful in bringing people along with those cultural shifts."

There are some organizations then that insert and adopt new values. It is the case of a manager that reports that his current organization has a lot of emphasis on empowerment and accountability "... fairly new language for us" but he finds these to be very familiar concepts (behind the "new" words). "So, bottom line, yes I find them all relevant even in a very different organization structure. I agree that my current organization does operate in a bit of a different way regarding positional power and hierarchy."

All these collected contributions to the theme provide a significant evidence that it is extremely hard for managers to make a shift when it comes to values and of course the longest you lived, practiced and worked with them, the more difficult is to remove them and the more frequent thing is that people say "they've just became part of me".

Think what a deep and long influence a company can really have on people !