

When Values Backfire: Leadership, Attribution, and Disenchantment In A Values-Driven Organization

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In The Leadership Quarterly

Elsevier Inc, Volume 17. Issue 1 (2006), pages 57-78

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Previous studies of the role of personal values in leadership laud the merits and possibilities of dynamic and honest direction. Especially in the corporate world, when charismatic leaders effectively manage their organizations and, more importantly, when they share and shape the ethical values of the organization through their vision, the firms achieve excellence and growth. On the other hand, comparatively few examinations exist of the opposite case, in which leaders display ineffectiveness and values contrary to those they have previously articulated. Lacking an in-depth review of these cases begs the question: what happens to a company and its staff when the leader exhibits principles or behaviors that employees perceive as hypocritical? McGill Professor Sandra E. Cha and Harvard Professor Amy C. Edmondson attempt to explore and to explain the consequences of congruent and contradictory expressions of values in the workplace through a case study of a small advertising firm in their article, "*When Values Backfire: Leadership, Attribution, and Disenchantment in a Values-Driven Organization.*"

The authors discuss the experiences of a small firm, called "Maverick Advertising" in this article to protect the firm's privacy, which at the start of the research employed only twelve full-time workers, and grew to almost three times that size during the study. To accurately study the effects of a rift between employee and management values, the professors first describe an instance of staff satisfaction with the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) principles. They break the article into two phases. In the first period, the CEO expresses goals and values in sync with those of his subordinates and the stated character of the small corporation. Among the ideals expressed by the CEO are being different, community, and unpretentiousness. Through interviews during this period, employees convey their positive perceptions of the CEO's principles, believing that the CEO values equality, openness, and family. The seeming agreement of staff with management goals and standards leads to high employee satisfaction. During the first phase of the case study on Maverick, Cha and Edmondson demonstrate that workers thrive and display contentment when their leader expresses and adheres to values similar to their own.

Yet, during the second phase of the data collection three years later, the authors observe that the CEO's actions become seen as ceasing to reflect the original ideals of the staff. In the first phase, the company prides itself on being "a different kind of ad agency," but the CEO decides at the beginning of the second segment to more than double the

agency's size and to crank out more projects rapidly – changes that are seen as moving the company in the direction of a more typical and less caring agency. He also makes several other decisions to reward specific employees for their service and fails to discipline under-performing individuals. Consequently, employees' opinions on the CEO shift from glowing to critical, and ultimately yield disenchantment. Employees go so far as to consider their once esteemed CEO a hypocrite, leading to decreasing work satisfaction. Although the CEO considers these changes as means to uphold the original set of values by increasing workers' opportunities, the CEO fails to accurately communicate the positive intentions of his goals and therefore appears to be motivated by greed.

Cha and Edmondson propose several intuitive solutions to this disconnect between employee and management perceptions of values. Most notably, they suggest that the CEO hold an open forum with employees to discuss any proposed changes to the firm that might alter the company's mission. Since a leader may be unaware of negative opinions of his conduct that may be viewed as hypocritical, workers should take the initiative in bringing their concerns to the CEO's attention. Holding anger towards a leader but not expressing one's dissatisfaction serves only to perpetuate the problem and to diminish the productivity of the work environment. Therefore, Cha and Edmondson urge employees to voice their opinions on leaders' performance in order to play an active role in the direction of their firms and to alert managers that their actions, even if benevolently conceived, have hypocritical or greedy connotations. *When Values Backfire* enters a relatively unexplored area of interpersonal dynamics in the workplace, providing sound advice on the importance of maintaining positive dialogue and coordination about values and goals between a firm's leaders and its regular staff.