

QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF VALUES

Context

Traditional approaches suggest that, along with first defining Vision and Purpose, leaders should identify the set of Values they want the team or organisation to uphold. What we believe is that by defining these things, we will be able to control what people in the organisation do and how they do it.

In contrast, complexity sciences that explore the way in which human beings come together, illuminate an important principle – that it is the behaviours or interactions between individuals that create the cultural patterns between us; these patterns then further influence and consolidate those behaviours within the ‘system’ or group for existing and new members. Sometimes we use short-hand terms like ‘culture’ and ‘values’ to describe the patterns evident in a group, organisation or community.

What we are presented with above is top-down control versus an emergent ‘bottom-up’ perspective.

In this article, I challenge the value of ‘values’ by sharing a perspective drawn from the study of complex adaptive systems and more explicitly, human systems dynamics.

Values on Command

Setting Values in an abstracted away at the top of an organisation brings some inherent problems.

Firstly, although it might be easy to name an ‘ideal’ set of values, it is much harder to make them come alive. Why? One reason is that sometimes we discover we have different interpretations of the terms we are using – so I might define ‘integrity’ as ‘living in alignment with my values’ whilst you might define integrity as being ‘law-abiding, honest, trustworthy’. In this example, you and I might believe we are talking about the same thing called ‘integrity’ but then later on in our interactions, I might behave in a way that aligns to my definition and discover that when you accuse me of ‘not acting with integrity’, it contravenes your definition. A possible solution may be to engage everyone in dialogue to ensure we all understand what we mean by the terms/ values we choose so that we can agree on common definitions. The next problem then arises – what actual behaviours do we think represent each value? Imagine how long our lists of behaviours will become as we try to cover all situations and contexts for each of our values?

When we start by choosing a selection of values statements, our choice is often a ‘wish list’ of things we like, or say we value but which are not necessarily evident in our interactions and actions or possibly even relevant to our situation. This abstracted process of defining and naming Values (and their relevant behaviours) moves us into a hypothetical situation with no grounding in the reality of what is already happening in the system. How often have you heard people say ‘yeah those are the Values, but that bears no reality to what really happens around here’. By not paying attention to what is actually happening in the system, we deny ourselves the potential to truly and usefully influence. Values on command does not work - if it did our organisations, communities and nations would be in very different states to the ones in which we find ourselves. So what can we do?

Behaviours drive patterns drive behaviours

By understanding the nature of complex adaptive systems and the science of emergence (ref. how shoals of fish move as one, birds flocking together) we begin to see that, to successfully effect a shift in the system, we need to change our focus of attention. Consider a flock of starlings – how would you begin to shape the patterns of flocking birds?

Imagine trying to change the pattern of a shoal of fish by manipulating the whole shoal with your hands..... any attempt to mould them from the outside will result in individual fish scattering in all directions away from the perceived ‘threat’; only to find them reforming as a coherent whole elsewhere in the ocean. Trying to shape the pattern from the top and the outside is nigh on impossible unless you bring a closed container around all the individuals all at once! And if you do that, you are likely to ‘kill’ the system – fish and nets come to mind. The same is true of trying to re-shape ‘values’ patterns from the top and the outside. It is like trying to sculpt fog or mould the movements of a shoal of fish or flocking birds from the outside – all are impossible – unless your containment strategy is so extreme, that the lives of



the individuals in the system become threatened. When severe external controls are introduced, the adaptability and sustainability of the system becomes compromised.

Back to the 'Boids'

Computer scientists discovered they could replicate flocking patterns on screen – not by working at the level of the pattern, but by naming the behaviours the birds (computer simulated 'boids') were displaying (Fly to the centre; Match others' speed; Don't fly into others).

The principle of working at the behavioural level is no less valid when working with and wanting to shift the patterns in emergent human systems. It is more useful to identify the helpful and unhelpful behaviours at play between people – and to seek to amplify the helpful ones – rather than wasting energy attempting to reach consensus on how to name, describe or mould the desired pattern/ culture/ values of the whole.

Just a Few, Simple Rules

It is amazing that, in any complex adaptive system, there are always just a few key pattern-defining behaviours (Simple Rules' as they are called in the science world). When we name them, it becomes possible for anyone and everyone in or joining the system to apply these to their own role and function and in so doing, to understand what is required/ expected of them over time. Well formed, simple behavioural statements can bring coherence and alignment to every role at every level in a human system eg. from individual, team through to a whole organisation.

Starting with what is already present

If we are truly to be able to influence how a system/ group/ organisation 'performs', it is helpful to first notice and seek to understand what is already 'playing out' in the interactions between the group members. If a group is new, it needs time for interactions and behaviours to emerge. Once early patterns begin to show up we can start naming evident behaviours and to discern which of these is supporting the group's purpose and work. It is these we would seek to amplify, and in so doing would shift attention away from the unhelpful behaviours.

Case Example: How a focus on Behaviours is laying the foundations for a new 'Collaboration'

The Leaders of several organisations have been collaborating on areas of delivery over the last few years. As circumstances in their context have been shifting they have wondered about establishing a more or less formal collaborative partnership. I am supporting them from an OD perspective, as they explore the efficacy of this business proposition. As we began to scope and focus what might fall within the remit of the 'Collaboration' it became clear that some incidents from the past were getting in the way of their engaging freely and openly. I helped them to have the conversation, through which we were able to tease out various behaviours that had played out which had been either helpful or unhelpful in advancing their work together. By doing this, they have begun to pinpoint a few key behaviours they want to amplify between themselves and amongst their staff.

1. *Always respond*
2. *Follow through on promises*
3. *Ask each other first*
4. *Share what we do well with others*
5. *Proactively engage to serve the success of the individual, the work in hand and our bigger mission*

We are in the early part of this process, and what will in part determine success, is the Leaders' individual and collective commitment to upholding these behaviours and in enabling their staff to do the same.

Just imagine what amazing patterns might emerge if all the people involved in the case study above find their flow through these behaviours? Could watching them in action be as captivating and breathtaking as this exquisite display of starlings in flight - I was moved to tears when I viewed this:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eakKfY5aHmY&feature=related>

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