

PAMPHLET 26

THE KEEPER OF THE VALUES

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@1999

Words from the Corporate Charter:

aim high
accept risks
reward performance and results
open and fair environment
encourage personal growth

Several of us in the newspaper business unit created a new advertising and distribution product to compete with direct mail and the post office. I selected someone to lead the project, and he left a secure position to accept the challenge. We studied, spent time with a consultant, visited other newspapers around the country, and generated revenue through successful experiments with the product. We then wrote a vision for the new business and were given approval to develop a business plan.

The project leader worked hard. Inspired by the vision he helped create, he saw the potential for the new distribution system. He was the right person for the job: energetic, courageous, a risk taker, aggressive, and willing to learn. He aimed high and accepted the risk.

The project leader worked with others and developed a business plan. Decisions were made to go forward. The project leader felt excited. He told me several times that the decision makers had told him he would lead this new business. Over two years of developing the product, he had grown to meet the challenge. Then, without warning, a job description for the leadership position was posted. He did not meet the qualifications. He had been in regular contact with the decision makers. No one told him of any changes in their thinking. The job description was clearly written with

a specific person in mind. It appeared that political power--not merit--would drive decisions.

The project leader was shocked and upset--so was I. I took several days to write a memo to my boss. (A senior vice-president who had directed and supported us since the inception of this project.) I tried to be diplomatic and to tell the truth as I saw it. I expressed my disappointment in how this process was handled, and I said we were not living by the companies values. We were not rewarding risk taking. We were not rewarding performance and results. We were not being open and fair or encouraging personal growth. The company charter said that is what we stood for.

The senior vice-president gave the confidential memo to the decision-makers. A flurry of meetings took place. They offered the project leader a position eventually. It was not what he hoped for, but I advised him to accept what I felt was the best offer he would get.

My boss told me that one of the other senior vice presidents was angry with me for writing the memo. The senior vice-president said he would arrange a meeting for me with this executive so we could clear the air. He assured me that it was not a big deal. The senior executive and I met for breakfast three months later. He was now the president of the company. He was incensed--shocked that someone had told the emperor he was wearing no clothes. The memo was a big deal to him.

Rather than discuss the issue raised, he went out of his way to tell me about a meeting he had attended many months prior. Someone in the meeting said that I expressed interest in having our business unit apply for the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award. He wanted me to know that those in the room had "laughed at and mocked you." I felt embarrassed. I wondered why he hadn't asked me about the reference to the Baldrige Award? I wondered why he and other senior managers would "laugh and mock" a business unit or person who wanted to be excellent? I wondered if he had reflected on why they reacted the way they did?

After several obscure criticisms and threats to my career, the leader of the company asked, "Who do you think you are? The keeper of the values?" We never did talk about living the values of the organization.

Most well-intentioned statements of values do little more than take up wall-space and increase organizational cynicism. Among the many reasons for this are:

- the values represent one person's beliefs; those expected to live the values were not involved in the creative process and therefore feel no commitment,
- no plan is developed that builds in feedback processes and accountabilities (the lack of a plan indicates a lack of true commitment),
- the values are not defined clearly and applied consistently throughout the organization,
- executives (who should be role-models) communicate "do as I say not do as I do," and
- leaders fail to teach the values and hold people accountable for living the values.

Leadership is about living our values and optimizing the natural dynamics of the living system. Values are the essential and enduring tenets of an organization; they are how we judge what is good and bad and right and wrong. Our principles provide a constant while everything else changes; they give an organization common cause and represent our spirituality and highest being. Living our ideals creates community. Our values are not to be compromised for money or short-term expediency. Many should take their ethics more seriously than they do.

Values conflict frequently. People differ in their perspectives on what constitutes living the organization's values. Therefore it is important that we talk about our differences. The conversation isn't about who is right or wrong but about coming to common understanding.

We must not "shoot-the-messenger." We must discuss our differences, give one another feedback, and listen to the viewpoints of others. We must then be willing to explain our positions and understand the views of others. We must be mature enough to apologize when we do not live our values, make our amends, recommit ourselves, and go forward as better people. By talking to one another we grow in our understanding and commitment to our values, we develop authentic and trusting relationships, and we weave the values into the fabric of the organization. It is the responsibility of leaders to create conditions for these behaviors to happen, and it is the responsibility of employees to stand up for their values and the values of the enterprise.

Push back when executives do not appear to be living the values they espouse. If the leader respects your courage and commitment you can

have hope for the organization. If you are blamed, attacked, or punished, leave as quick as you can. The organization is sick and you cannot heal it alone.

The young people of Wallins Creek, in Harlan County, Kentucky know the exhilaration of standing up for what they believe in. Black Mountain is at the core of the identity of the people of Harlan County. Avril Rogers, Harlan County resident said, "I think when you are born in a place that you're like a tree. That you've got your roots." Another resident, Sister Beth Davies said:

Some people look at these mountains in economic terms and they look at the mountain as a mine. Others of us look at the mountain as a source of hope. And I think really there are so few places of soul left in all of us, and we're taking as quickly as we can, we're taking away so much of the land and putting up buildings and building roads and concrete. And we've gotten away from the whole spirituality of what just walking through a forest does and listening to the birds and looking at the flowers and just hearing the sounds here.

When Powell Mountain Coal Company planned to begin mining operations that would destroy the top of Black Mountain, the students of Judy Bryson's seventh science class decided to try to save the mountain (most of their families earned their income from the mines).

Seventh-grader Mike Ashurst said:

If they blew it up, then our heritage, it wouldn't be nothing no more....I didn't know there were so many endangered species up there, like the Indiana bat and the re-backed mouse. I just didn't know stuff like that. And if they mine and stuff, it will just hurt them and kill them.

Student Jacob Doyle, said:

We're not just a bunch of kids that don't know what we're doing. We know what we're doing. We studied it. We researched. We even got on computers and found out stuff about the mountain.

With few resources, the class gained the support of environmentalists and lawyers. Other schoolchildren became involved--200 in all. The media

took notice and soon the politicians got involved. This past spring eight coal and timber companies agreed to sell their mineral and logging rights on Black Mountain to the state. When the purchase is completed, the top of Black Mountain will be preserved forever.

Student Justin Harris said:

We all talked about it, and we stuck with it. Cause I felt that we had it in us that we could go make a difference if we really, really tried.

Student Kim Humphrey said:

I'm proud that because even from where we live, as a part of our culture we've been stereotyped as not really stupid but sort of naive to our surroundings and what's going on. And I'm thankful. I'm glad that we had a chance to prove that we can make a difference and that we're not naive people that live here.

Student Tyler Wright said:

We made history. ...I think the kids that fought to preserve Black Mountain, in their hearts, it feels like they've just fought a war and won because they fought as hard as they could and did everything they possibly knew how to do to get Black Mountain saved and preserved.

Who is the keeper of the values? Ask the young people of Appalachia in Harlan County, Kentucky and they will tell you that they are the keepers of the values. And so am I. And so are you.