

# The quickest way to find out what's really valued (and how to change it)

*Most leaders can describe the values of their organisation, but fewer are successful at 'walking that talk'. In fact, as communication increases about an organisation's values, there's a greater risk that employees and customers will become cynical. The gap between the 'walk' and 'talk' is always more visible than we think. As anyone involved in a culture change process will know, it takes time and effort to align these two.*



What are some of the quickest ways a leader can recognise the gap and take the responsibility required to do something about it?

Culture is the result of the messages people receive about what's really valued. And the decisions we make are one of the most powerful ways that we, as leaders, can express our values. Certain decisions will require us to choose one thing over another, in a scenario where we have limited resources and cannot have everything. If we choose to do something different in one of these moments, then we're sending a strong signal that the culture is changing. The gap between 'walk' and 'talk' just got smaller.

So where can we make the most visible day-to-day decisions to reflect our values? In the areas where resources are most limited: our time and our budget.

## **Time and money never lie**

What are we saying we value the most as we allocate these scarce resources?

## **How we allocate time**

There are only so many hours in the day, and it never feels like enough.

## **How we spend money**

With so many areas calling for investment, we have to prioritise.

On a personal level, if you really want to understand my values, look at my calendar and my credit card statement. How I spend my time and money says more about what I value than anything I may tell you. The same applies to organisations. I lost my luggage recently, and discovered that the lost baggage department of the airline was only open 08:00-16:00, in one time zone. Yet the sales department was open 24/7. What does that airline really care about? My well-being, or the next purchase?

We may say that customers are important to us, but do we free up our people to spend more time with them? We may say that safety comes first,

but are we willing to sacrifice a production run because a team member has raised concerns?

### **Influencing a culture quickly**

Our company, Walking the Talk, is often asked by leaders: What's the quickest way I can influence our culture? We tell them: decisions based on time and money are highly visible symbols that represent some of the greatest opportunities to demonstrate change. Think of them as quick wins. If you sit down and do an audit of the messages you're sending through these channels, you can quickly make changes that will get talked about throughout the organisation.

## **What's the quickest way I can influence our culture?**

An insurance company we worked with was seeking to embed patterns of behaviour that facilitate innovation. They secured board approval for a \$10m reward program to celebrate innovation success – a vehicle for incentivizing the behaviours they'd picked as the most important.

As outlined in the case study the of Portuguese edition of my book *'Walking the Talk: Building a Culture for Success'*, the incoming president of a leading Brazilian Media group

believed that leadership quality was the key to performance. This CEO made the decision to devote every Monday afternoon to 1-on-1 skip-level interviews with the 84 leaders who were direct reports of his executive team. It took him a year, but he considers it one of the most important decisions he took. The interviews provided him with invaluable data about his leadership group, how he could help them perform better, who would probably not make it, and who most represented the culture goals he had of becoming a one-team and reader-centric company.

### **Learn from Apple and Starbucks**

A great deal of Apple's success is attributed to how much they value simplicity. Steve Jobs would famously ask his staff why they needed to be in a particular meeting. If they couldn't come up with a good enough answer, he would ask them to leave and encourage them not to come back. In doing this, Jobs was sending a strong message about how time should be used: **1.** Keep meetings with as few people as possible to make decision-making simpler. **2.** Use your own time to go to meetings where you really feel you can add value.

When Howard Schultz returned to lead Starbucks in 2008, he made choices about time and money that sent immediate signals about what was changing. One was to reinstate the "integrity of what was in the cup". This value of quality led him to close every store for staff training on how to make a perfect cup of coffee. He believed the role of store manager at Starbucks

was key, so he brought them all together, in New Orleans, at a meeting that cost \$32m, in order to talk through how bad things had gotten and what they could do together to turn it around.

### **Leaders must walk the talk**

As a leader, it's easy to say that you value something, but much harder to line your spending up with that intent. Your actions will always speak louder than your words. However, when those two things do align, you gain that golden prize: credibility. If you're involved in efforts to strengthen certain values in your culture, changing how money and time are spent can be a very powerful lever, and it can start with you.

### **How you can put this into action with your team?**

1. As you're preparing to set your budget together, discuss whether the allocation of resources affects the values you believe in. What could you do to re-assign investment?
2. Look at the agendas of your meetings: Which items are first on the agenda and which come last (and often bumped or squeezed if you're running out of time). How could you change the allocation of time in your agendas to better reflect the values you want to espouse? For example, organisations with a very strong value of safety always start their meeting with a safety item.

### **Taking action as an individual**

1. At work, take a look at your own calendar and see how your time is allocated over the week. What values are reflected? Add in 5% more time on the value you most believe in but are not expressing. That's two hours a week. Which might mean substituting a project meeting you don't really need to be at for a customer meeting. Or exchanging breakfast with a headhunter to create a block of time to mentor one of your people one to one. Culture change happens decision by decision. Even 5% will be noticed by others.
2. Dare to take this home? Firstly, think about what you believe you value personally, and then follow it up with an honest examination of your calendar and your bank statements. Do they line up? Or are you kidding yourself? Try sitting down with your partner, or your family, and having a conversation about the values that sit underneath the way you manage your budget. I promise you, it'll be an enlightening experience.

## **Leaders must walk their talk**

*This article originally appeared in January 2015 on Culture University, a workplace culture educational site where the top workplace culture experts in the world share their insights.*