Integrity at Work During a Global Pandemic

Values, Culture and Branding

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To hear about integrity in our new business environment, we reached out to Rodney Peyton OBE MD – an accomplished trauma surgeon, who has been at the vanguard of initiatives to promote integrity in surgical practice throughout the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, and also as an international tutor for the College of Surgeons of England, a senior surgeon in both Gulf Wars as well as in his extensive medico-legal practice, where he is an acknowledged international expert. He is a published author, keynote speaker and holder of several prestigious awards for services to medicine in the UK, Germany, Sweden and South Africa. Rodney is also an entrepreneur with over 30 years' experience as a business owner and investor, having property portfolios and investments across the UK, US and Australia.

Introduction

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about massive disruption to traditional work practices, with staff at all levels working from home and future arrangements for more face-to-face work characterised by radically enhanced health and safety measures. This has resulted, among other issues, in the requirement to determine how best to protect the identity, culture and reputation of organisations while adapting to remote working. The considerably reduced capacity for direct supervision of staff, which may well continue in the longer term, makes it all the more essential staff are clear on expectations, validated for their contribution and that they understand and have bought into the vision and ethos of their organisation. CEOs and senior management will need to prioritise the new 'AI' - Accountability and Integrity - both internal and external to the organisation.

This article, based on a keynote speech given to PwC Headquarters, Ireland considers how integrity at work depends on the values, culture and branding of the organisation and how these interlinking aspects of good business can be developed. It also looks at the role of employees and managers at all levels in upholding the reputation of the company, both internally to offset negativity and externally by outstanding customer service. This is not just paying lip service to a mission statement but also being accountable for its delivery. Integrity is, therefore, a key concept for businesses, impacting at all levels including strategic, tactical, and operational.

Napoleon Hill, more than 80 years ago, defined integrity as 'the consistency of style and behaviour along with steadfastness of purpose'. At its heart, integrity is a value, an ecological belief or ideal which is good for employees, the business and its relationships with the outside world. It consists of an integrated pattern of knowledge, beliefs and behaviour for which the individual and the organisation can hold themselves accountable. Integrity is such a basic human concept that children, who do not always seem to listen to what adults say, do see what adults do and intrinsically know and understand the meaning of trust and integrity.

Integrity is not just an internal thought process, but also the outward manifestation of thoughts in action. It is further defined in the Oxford dictionary as being a 'quality of honesty' and 'having strong moral principle which one refuses to change', with a 'firm adherence to a code'. Although most of us would aspire to have integrity and see ourselves as law-abiding citizens, when asked whether we have ever intentionally broken the speed limit, few can deny it. Various excuses spring to mind such as 'it was a Sunday', 'the motorway was clear', 'it was a new car', 'someone was sick' or 'I was in a particular hurry'. In other words, we are willing to see some values as context-specific. This has become particularly pertinent during the current environment and compliance with the ever-changing rules governing lockdown and has provoked extreme reactions when those public figures who make the rules are found to have breached not only the rules but public confidence in senior officials.

What does this mean for working from home in the new business environment? How do we ensure that staff at all levels are supported to maintain the same allegiance to the business and their clients? How can they be helped to acknowledge that their attitude, particularly in smaller companies, can make or break the business? It is at these times of stress that staff values may be more in conflict and business leaders, more than ever, need to model core values and empower staff to be more conscious of the impact of their words and actions, both inside the organisation with colleagues and externally with customers.

Values

So, what is a value? A value is a belief, a feeling of certainty that something is important and worthwhile. Every business and every team should be encouraged to define their core values, the principles to which they are aligned, and which provide their identity. The values for which an organisation wants to be recognised must influence attitude and behaviour.

At an individual level, values are part of a mindset, part of a person's identity reflecting how they see themselves and how they want others to perceive them. Core values reflect personal vision and purpose along with the difference an individual wants to make in their environment. This is the basis of Stedman Graham's 'Identity Leadership', in which he argues that: "It is difficult to lead others when you have not mastered yourself. If you are not clear who you are, the world at large will define you". Similarly, Roger Ailes, in his book 'You are the Message', states: "Unless you identify yourself as a walking, talking message, you miss the critical point. The totality of who you are affects how others think of and respond to you and your words are meaningless

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unless the rest of your behaviours and actions are in synchronisation".

Being aligned with the vision and core values of their organisation is a fundamental requirement of a CEO – the bigger task is ensuring those values are integrated into the fabric of the business and this can only be accomplished when staff at all levels, from the top team to the shop floor, believe in and uphold them. When individuals have clarity of purpose, they are more likely to make good choices in difficult situations because their decision-making is guided by their moral code and their values. Rather than dwelling on past mistakes and blaming others, they integrate the learning from the past in planning for the future. They develop positive, solution-focused approaches and resist sticking to patterns which have not served them in the past. Stuart Emery commented that, to achieve mastery in any subject, it is important "not to protect but to correct", so it is not a matter of being right, but rather working hard to get it right in the circumstances. Upholding standards and managing necessary changes requires discipline and self-belief as well as belief in the purpose and values of the business.

The challenge is that some values are influenced by context and experience and may come into conflict with each other or become hierarchical in particular situations, for instance, the values of honesty and loyalty. The most loyal staff may find themselves conflicted if they perceive that a business is not being totally honest and transparent, or if they see the values of consistency and fair play are not applied equitably in drawing up rotas or in opportunities for advancement. It is important to address such feelings which can harbour resentment. Values can also be conflicted when attempts are made

to drive standards or change working practices and attention must always be given to both the content and timeliness of communication, anticipating and addressing potential objections. While always striving to see things can be done better, faster and more efficiently, managers should guard against looking for perfection and accept that failures are inevitable when attempting to bring about change.

An individual's potential is like a battery - if it is not used, the energy drains away. Integrity requires the alignment of values with what and who a person is and how they believe they should act.

Culture

When a group of people with similar values act together consistently this determines the culture of their team, their section, their region and ultimately the culture of an organisation. Ensuring the culture is positive and healthy depends on staff aligning with the values of the organisation and performing consistently to the standards of behaviour and attitude expected of them. There is an old saying: 'Show me your friends and I will show you the quality of your life'. Another way of saying this is "You are who you spend your time with". Whether at home or in work, choose peers and confidantes carefully – do not get drawn into the blame culture.

All businesses are run by groups coming together at the three levels of strategic, tactical and operational. Strategic leadership is about formulating the mission or vision of the organisation, both horizontally across its range of activities and vertically, drilling down on each activity. Everyone must

understand and subscribe to the common vision. Strategically, all entrepreneurial businesses exist to serve others in their niche market and to produce a profit by making clients more successful. Statutory and not for profit organisations also must serve the needs of their clientele while living within a budget and, as demonstrated in the recent economic climate, all have to do it within an ever-changing context. At a tactical level, decisions are made as to how the strategic direction is going to be carried out while operational management focuses on the detail of what is going to be done and who is going to do it, on a day by day, week by week basis.

In smaller businesses responsibility for all of these functions may rest with a small group of managers, while in larger organisations these functions will be more separated making it a bigger challenge for management to ensure that everyone is on the same track. This needs a continuous process of communication and engagement throughout the organisation, vertically and horizontally. If the culture of the various groups within the organisation do not match the business purpose, vision and values, this impacts the results, no matter what decisions are reached in the boardroom. It is a true saying that: 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'. Management must be alert to issues in their departments, addressing them quickly and effectively. They need to listen to understand, they need to identify potential dissenters and explore the basis of any negativity and unrest. Blaming management needs to be countered with staff taking control for raising standards and productivity within the team. Staff should be encouraged to come up with potential solutions to every issue, rather than complaining about the problems.

When it comes to culture, circumstances do not matter, attitude does. Hence the old analogy: 'Is the glass half empty or half full?'. Actually, the proverbial glass is always full, it is just that the contents are half water and half air, and both are important. The reality is that without water one would die within three to four days, however without air one would die within three to four minutes! Staff need to be helped to see the opportunities that lie in the gaps, remembering opportunities, like energy, are never lost, they just go to someone else who was quicker to recognise and respond to them.

A healthy culture is dependent on all staff being in integrity and closely aligned with the purpose and values of the company. This requires opportunities for growth and progression through training, mentorship and continuing professional development within a validated performance appraisal system.

Branding

If values and culture are the main building blocks for integrity within a company, then branding is about external reputation and hence public accountability. Branding is how an individual trader or business is seen and judged by the outside world. Marketing is all about the brand and how customers feel by associating with the business. Having integrity, and taking actions which are aligned with core values, generates certainty and trust by clients leading to success in business. One of the biggest sources of business failure is the lack of trust by clients and customers which is often reflected in market value. Therefore, there has to be continual internal training for staff in relation to core values and also external education to give awareness of the brand and how it adds value to clients.

As evidenced in the media, every company needs to be seen to be both technically and socially competent. Staff may be hired for their technical ability or business acumen, but they also have to be socially competent and a champion of the company, especially at higher levels of management.

Branding has two important components, branding by association and branding by results.

Individuals who represent the company externally are branded by association. Clients see them as part of the company and expect them to uphold the core values and work practices. By association, a client or customer expects a level of competence and certain standards of behaviour from that individual, which are consistent with the company ethos.

The company's branding comes from its results which is how its employees in the past have represented the business. Branding by results and branding by association are therefore intertwined. If a client has a bad experience, a product does not arrive on time or the quality is poor, it is not just their account manager they blame but also the parent company. Conversely, the company can have its brand diminished by association due to a disrespectful attitude of their employee. This affects not just on the business but also reflects on every other employee. This happens across all sectors and industries - people don't just blame the doctor, they sue the hospital.

Successful branding requires everyone in the business to be customer-centred and service-oriented. This means actively listening to understand what the customer wants and having mechanisms in place to process consumer feedback and analyse trends. If the client becomes more successful because of their interaction with employees, the reputation and branding of the company is likewise increased.

Employees must protect their personal brand and take care to ensure they separate personal and professional opinion. Such boundaries are more difficult at more senior levels where individuals must be constantly seen to walk their talk and be accountable to the integrity demanded of their position in both personal and professional life. They have to be 100% consistent in what they say and do.

Conclusion

Accountability and integrity are vital to the success of any business. For the individual employee it is about their values. The attitude and behaviour of groups of staff indicate the culture within an organisation and how this culture is aligned with the mission of the business leads to the brand.

Promoting integration of core values at all levels is an ongoing and essential aspect of defining the culture of a successful business and of protecting its brand. Guarding this integrity is a prime responsibility of any CEO.

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