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## **VALUES STATEMENTS WITH REAL IMPACT (Part 2)**

An explicit values statement is a powerful governance tool. The conclusion of this two-part series looks at how organizations enhance their conventional values statements with detailed descriptions that help answer the question, "How do we carry out our mission?" It will also look at the Board's critical role in ensuring that the values are truly lived, and are reflected in policies and practices.

### **The beauty is in the detail**

Good values statements avoid lists of single words. When an organization says, "We value communication, common sense and simplicity over excessive policy and bureaucracy", it has given much more information to its staff than just saying "Simplicity". Descriptive definitions transform slogans into meaningful guidelines, as shown by these other great examples drawn from the Canadian Cancer Society:

- Responsiveness – we strive to be accessible, flexible, transparent, and to demonstrate a sense of urgency in our resolve and decision-making.
- Accountability – we are committed to measuring, achieving and reporting results, and to using donor dollars wisely.
- Teamwork – we are committed to effective partnerships between volunteers and staff, and we seek opportunities to form alliances with others.

### **Do it your way**

Values statements lend themselves to many creative forms that deliver emotional and thought-provoking impact. There's no need to be restricted to a standard list. Some private and non-profit organizations use a code of ethics, a credo, or "founding principles" to augment or replace a conventional values statement. They range from simple lists to international conventions. Others integrate extensive values into their mission and vision.

The test is whether these statements provide strategic guidance for day-to-day decision-making. For example:

- The John Howard Society sets out six principles to guide the activities of its employees and volunteers, including "People have the right to live in a safe and peaceful society as well as a responsibility implied by this right to respect the law" and "All people have the potential to become responsible citizens."

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- GOAL has an “Ethos”, a value-loaded mission statement (“...We believe that the money we collect must be spent directly on the people who need it most. To do that, we keep our administration costs to a bare minimum...”).
- UNICEF has created The Convention of the Rights of the Child, a legally binding international instrument. It spells out foundation principles, such as “Non-discrimination means that all children have the same right to develop their potential -- all children, in all situations, all of the time, everywhere”.

These kinds of statements help people to respect the intent and spirit of their organization’s values even when specific situations aren’t covered.

### **It’s what you do and not what you say that counts.**

Communicating your values to those expected to embody them is critical. Any investment in developing a values statement should be accompanied by an effective communications plan to spread the word to internal and external stakeholders. But posting organizational values on your website, in your annual report, or even in the lunch room won’t make much difference unless there is follow-up to see how they are acted on.

A Board’s job is to ask how the organization’s policies and practices can become better aligned with its mission, vision and values. Time spent uncovering and writing up an organization’s core purpose, its desired future and core values should be a fraction of the ongoing effort of ensuring alignment, according to management expert Jim Collins.

Strategic planning sessions should set aside time to ask:

- Are our program objectives, policies and tactics in line with our values?
- How are alignments are working?
- What misalignments should be corrected?
- Are we rewarding strong alignment?

Generally, unless a values statement is a feel-good public relations tool drafted in isolation by the organization’s best communicator or by a PR firm, most organizations truly believe their core values. Misalignments don’t necessarily suggest cynicism.

For example, an organization that has dealt with client fraud at some point in its history may put in place screening procedures to prevent similar nasty surprises and misallocation of resources. Such practices can continue long after the original incident is forgotten – and be out of step with values the organization wishes to enshrine, such as respect and trust in the individual. When this happens it’s time for realignment.

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## **The value of values**

Strong values statements keep an organization on track. They help foster the right choices in both day-to-day and strategic decision-making. Along with mission and vision, they give Boards and staff a foundation for resolving new challenges, including financial crises, strategies to cope with changes in the environment, or the need to adjust project priorities. They help with tricky ethical questions that stray into grey area.

In periods of turbulent change, values provide stability. Do you want to know whether a new alliance or a new leader is a good fit with the organization? Check whether their demonstrated values are the same as your core values.

Over time, an organization's actions and reputation will become synonymous with the values it cherishes, and this in turn will pay off with better recruitment, fundraising and stronger commitment from its stakeholders. A meaningful values statement is an important investment for any organization.

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