

ESSAY

# WHAT DO THESE VALUES HAVE TO DO WITH ME?

In companies, managers often react to announcements of cultural transformation with hesitation and skepticism. This attitude is due in part to their own concept of management



In many companies and major industrial groups, a cultural transformation often begins with the declaration of new corporate values. In the next step, the intermediary role of the managers is highlighted. They are the “carriers of change,” and their job is to “embody” the new values, “bring them to life,” and help employees understand them. This appeal generally ends with a Commitment Act, in which the next levels of management promise, in symbolic and sometimes dramatic ways, to fulfill these tasks and play this role.

However, the “eventization” of the first phase of this cultural transformation is always accompanied by two effects. On the one hand, an emotional appeal reaches the hearts of the participating managers, who are generally a practi-

cal-minded group. On the other, this way of staging the appeal is perceived as a unique event. When it’s over, people part and go about their business.

## PERSONAL TRANSFER OF LEARNING

However, this event is much more meaningful from the perspective of the CEO and the top management. It’s the beginning of a process. The CEO and the top management expect the second and third-level managers to internalize the corporate strategy—and that means changing the culture, accepting the assignment, and taking responsibility for explaining the transformation to the employees. Top management is depending on a very personal transfer of learning by these



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managers—a transfer that takes place independently of supportive measures and assistance from corporate communications or the HR department. In other words, top management trusts its managers to do the right thing.

However, from the perspective of the managers in question, this expectation, especially with regard to cultural transformation, is often not perceived, let alone recognized. What's worse, in many cases the obligation to speak on behalf of corporate management and its goals and to explain the cultural transformation is often regarded as an imposition. This happens because cultural transformation implies a need for changes in people's collective and individual attitudes and behavior. In this situation, new values provide orientation, but they always point to deficits in the business and process culture that already exists. Thus they also imply criticism of individuals' personal behavior and day-to-day management.

People tend to react to such latent criticism reflexively with the familiar counteraccusation “You too!”—the required change of behavior is instantly thrown back at its initiators with the demand: “Then you go first.” As for their own role in the process, their feeling is “As long as we don't see it happening, we won't join in!”

The doubts about the seriousness of the initiators make life much easier, and they basically legitimize hesitancy and delays regarding critical self-examination and a willingness to learn. This inertia robs people of any motivation to accept and carry out the declared task of communicating the values and providing leadership. The order of the day is “Let's just wait and see” and “Let's get back to work!”

### NARROWING LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

That brings us to another interesting and typical phenomenon of applied refusal: the widespread idea that the requested task of explaining and communicating is not actually part of a manager's job description. People who share this concept reduce their management activities to the control of business and production processes.

However, top management expects commitment and implementation. And—another equally important consideration during this stage—the employees also expect explanation and interpretation, especially concerning topics that are not quickly understandable. Managers must take on this task; it's part of their job.

Oddly enough, managers tend to willingly underestimate this justified demand of their employees. Here we are experiencing a phenomenon that could be called a management paradox. Managers expect the superiors who are “above them” to give them precise explanations of what corporate strategy decisions mean and how they are interrelated. If these explanations are not provided, or if they are insufficient from the managers' perspective, the managers react extremely indignantly and complain—quietly or loudly. However, the very same managers deliberately ignore the fact that the employees “under them” have the very same expectation and are waiting for explanations.

It may be helpful to briefly consider the reaction and behavior patterns I've just described. This could be the first step to honoring something that is a prerequisite of every cultural transformation: mutual trust between corporate management, managers, and their employees.