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Book Review: Values-Based Leadership

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Book Review:

Values-Based Leadership: A Revolutionary Approach to Business Success and Personal Prosperity

Kenneth Majer

(MajerCommunications, San Diego,
California, U.S.A.; 2004; ISBN 0-
9743940-0-9) U.S.\$26.00

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In recent years, the business world has experienced a disturbing decline in the expression of positive values by some of its leaders which, in turn, led to difficulties and even collapses of several significant companies (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, and HealthSouth). These business debacles were primarily caused by a lack of self-discipline of some company leaders and the absence of suitable organization guidelines and government regulations.

Companies typically begin to struggle when corporate values differ from the values held by employees. The result is that some employees begin to bend the rules while others lose enthusiasm for their work and disengage from daily business and work-related social activities. Unfortunately all too often, employees feel that they can express their values more often at home than at work. However, values (i.e., "esteemed qualities which are intrinsically desirable and have importance") play a major role in how people in organizations interact with each other, how business leaders run their organizations, and what reputation a company has in the local community and greater business world. Discussing values at work is done rarely although it is important because each person has his/her own set of values which are responsible for each individual's behavior.

A few months ago, I came across an interesting book about values-based leadership which I believe is worth the investment. The book consists of 18 short chapters, is easy to read, and can be finished within only a few hours. The author provides practical guidelines on how to define values and create a positive value system for an organization by involving all employees. He also engages the reader in a novel format and introduces him to the principles and processes of ethical leadership.

The book is about Robb Reinhart, a CEO of a major Midwestern U.S. food distribution company, who realizes one day that his company is drifting away from its business goals because of the lack of a strong foundation of values to

guide positive and consistent behavior. Reinhart undertook a philosophical journey with the help of his son's soccer coach Bobby Olson. Olson served as a mentor for Reinhart and helped him to understand that recognizing and nurturing winning attitudes which come from within each person (i.e., from the personal values they hold), is the key to success of individuals as well as teams.

During his journey, Reinhart underwent deep introspection which allowed him to reflect on the set of five values (Honesty, Integrity, Profits, People, and Opportunity) that have guided his life and which he chose as the foundation for running the company. He suddenly realized that the people in his company were not living these values anymore. The reason is that these values are his values and not necessarily the values of his employees. He met with his executive team and asked a simple question to find out about their values: "How do you like to spend your time when you are not working?" This question initiated a lively discussion and within a few hours, the executive team had a list of thirty-two values of which they finally selected five central core values (Customer Satisfaction, Trust, Communication, Learning, and Respect). To validate these values, they sent an email questionnaire to all employees of the company. This was important because they needed a broad support base if creating a values-based company culture was going to be successful. With the input of all employees, they finally created a commonly accepted set of six core values (Customer Satisfaction, Trust, Communication, Learning, Respect, and Honesty). In order to implement this values-based culture throughout the company, they used the following implementation principles: (1) Involve everyone in the creation of a set of values; (2) Create a compelling vision of the future; (3) Communicate expectations clearly; and (4) Monitor and reward the right behaviors. Then they formed four teams to come up with recommendations for each of these principles. They were

highly engaged, creative, and considered everything including voicemail, email, public relations, and advertising. They also created a huge wall poster which was entitled: "How We Do Things Around Here – and Why." They developed a plan of action over the next six months with clear accountabilities and deadlines. This finally led to the successful implementation of a values-based company culture.

In conclusion, I believe that this book is an excellent guide for leaders in both profit and nonprofit organizations. It is also a very useful book for academicians teaching students what values-based leadership is all about and how it can be reached. In

fact, I used this book in the classroom with business graduate students, and we created together a set of core values for our classroom team by following the guidelines laid out in Kenneth Majer's book. All students were highly engaged in this exercise and several of them indicated that they would like to try out this exercise in their organizations. I believe that the ideas presented in Majer's book come at a very appropriate time, which means, at a time when many good companies fail because of a lack of values-based leadership and ethical performance of organizations.

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