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Article by Keith Coats

Dear Yves: A conversation around Values

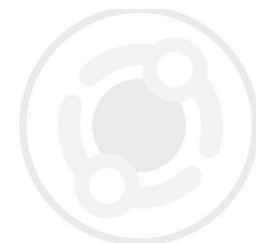
What does 'values-driven leadership' mean for companies today?

Article at a glance

Following a presentation on Invitational Leadership at a two day workshop for senior leaders at a prominent multi-national, the CEO of the company and Keith Coats engaged in a chat about values and the role they play in a company. He invited Keith to email him some thoughts around the four values his company had framed. Here is Keith's response. It is an excellent insight into the type of values-driven leadership required in companies today.

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Dear Yves,

Thank you for the invitation to reflect on the four values - diversity, trust, integrity and quality - around which your company is orientated. They are good words with powerful meanings and certainly have the capacity to inform attitudes, shape behaviour and inspire performance. I hope then that these brief thoughts serve to further enhance your conversation around your values.

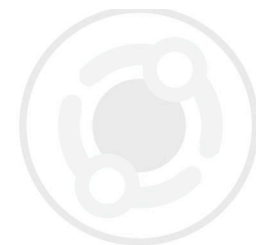
Diversity.

A great deal of words and text swirl around this single word. It is a word that assumes different meanings in different contexts and certainly here in South Africa, "diversity" has more often than not come to mean "transformation". However I don't think this is where we should go in our reflection on diversity. Whilst doing some work in the Asia Pacific Leadership Program at the East West Center in Hawaii recently, I was privileged to hear a lecture by Professor Peter Hershock on this very topic. He made a striking point that was graphically reinforced by a powerful analogy. Peter's point was that we often mistake diversity for variety. The analogy he then employed to illustrate this was to contrast a zoo with that of an eco-system. The zoo represents variety. A wide range of animals on display, each animal contained neatly within their own cage. The entire system of the zoo is totally dependent for survival and sustainability on external interventions. Cut off the lights and stop the feeding and over time the system will die. This Peter said, was an example of variety.

Diversity, Peter went on to explain was like an eco-system where various systems connect, collide and co-exist in a self-organising and sustaining dance. This is a place of chaos, adaptation and dynamic evolution. This is experienced in greater measure at the place where the respective systems intersect - the eco-tones. In this system external interventions are not required for sustainability as the system adapts and evolves in response to any external influence. Predictability and certainty are in short supply in this context and yet there is an abundance of creativity, spontaneity and resilience. It is a dynamic environment. This, Peter suggested, offers us a better picture and metaphor for understanding and dealing with diversity.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that we have opted for variety as opposed to diversity within our corporations and

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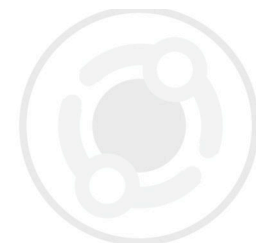
Understanding diversity in this manner, as an eco-system rather than a zoo, would I suggest, change a great deal about how we approach the management of the subject. Furthermore I don't think one can "do" diversity - it is not a verb but rather it is an adjective: diversity simply is - it exists all around us and is, in a connected world, unavoidable. Flying back to South Africa recently I sat next to an American gentleman who somewhat candidly informed me that he "didn't do diversity" which in his context was used as a polite way in which to frame his racial prejudices. I suppose one has a choice to not engage in diversity but such isolation merely robs one of the growth, creativity and richness that diversity offers. Diversity, or the eco-tones are uncomfortable spaces as they will always question assumptions, expose prejudices and challenge worldviews. But all this is to be welcomed in the name of growth in a paradoxical world. And if growth and participation - or "staff engagement" as you frame it, are the desired outcomes, then diversity and all it brings is not optional.

One final comment pertaining to diversity in the South African context. You heard me speak about the fact that I believe that South Africa has a significant contribution to make to the global conversation on diversity. I want to suggest that it is companies like yours that need to take what you know and don't know around diversity to the global stage. Be bold in doing so for out there is a world floundering in this area. You, your company and South Africa has much to offer in this regard. Perhaps more than you realise!

Trust.

Without it there can be no real leadership. The challenge is that trust takes time to develop but can so quickly be destroyed. In the pursuit of order without control, trust becomes the currency that regulates relationships. One can afford to pardon honest endeavour that fails to meet expectations; but one cannot afford to overlook situations where trust given has been abused and broken. This is the "unpardonable sin" in the context of a relational economy. However care needs to be taken to unpack what it is you mean by "trust" in order to ensure a common understanding of exactly what is meant by this term. Both cultural and personal nuances can play havoc with trust and so be sure to put it in context and come to a common understanding as to what trust within your context will look like. Often we talk about the need to "earn trust" but like the teacher who told his class he would start by giving all the pupils 100%, I like the idea of giving trust before it is earned. I think by doing so, as risky as it might be, you will be surprised at how people step up to the plate. We spoke about learning from kids (which reminds me to ensure that I send you my book, Everything I know about leadership I learnt from the Kids) and so perhaps a clue as to how best to go about instilling trust in your work place, would be to ask how you achieved that at home? Just a thought. I wonder what your staff would say when asked to complete the following sentence: I feel trusted when ...

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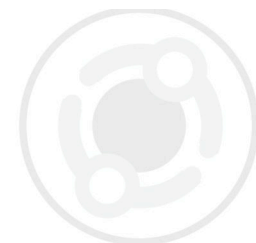
I recall reading that the root from which the word integrity emerges is intergratis. This carries the idea of “integration”. In other words integrity is about integration. Integration of what? you might ask. Well I think it has to do with the link between who we say we are (as individuals or as a company) and who we really are; between what we say and do; between our values and our behaviour; between the unseen and the seen. The best description of “presence” (we often hear someone as having “presence”) that I know of is that presence, is that place where the inner world of oneself, meets the outer world of activity. I am sure you will know what I mean here and will be able to instantly recall such people who have crossed your path for whom this is a fitting description. I can recall an informal chance meeting with Nelson Mandela where there was the opportunity for some intimate conversation during which I was stuck by Madiba’s “presence”. Of course there have been many others who touch our journeys for whom the same is true but who don’t have the public stature of someone like a Nelson Mandela. Just this past week I was part of a conversation that intersected the concept of integrity. During the conversation I came to realise that integrity is a personal thing. It looks different to different people. This concerns me a bit but has certainly got me thinking as to what integrity might look like in a world where it seems that situational ethics holds sway. However it also serves to remind me that we live in a sea of diversity and as comfortable as it would be to have “my” interpretation of integrity as the norm, this simply is not the case. Because of this reality, I have something to learn.

Quality.

This is perhaps the easiest of your four values to determine and measure. Ensuring quality of products has become a non-negotiable in this highly competitive environment and any flaws in this area are quickly exposed and tend to spread through the public domain like a virus. Stories of poor quality, shoddy workmanship get passed on and do immeasurable damage to reputation and I would guess sales and therefore turnover. However quality can be applied to more than products and I would guess that this would have been in the thinking of those responsible for penning this value in your context. In addition to quality pertaining to products, there is quality of life, of work and of environment. All these play a vital role in building and leading healthy organisations. Conversations around quality need to engage staff and extend into these additional areas. After all they are areas that impact on all of us and because of that, we all should be able to contribute what we think could be done to improve the situation or where the benchmarks should be set.

Aside from this, another thought linked to quality: Whilst quality is essential in the selling of your product, it is also something that, along with reasonable pricing, is now taken as a given. As we move into what we in TomorrowToday.biz call a “Connection Economy”, another factor emerges as essential in order to maintain a competitive advantage. That addition factor is relationship. The “quality of relationship” is the

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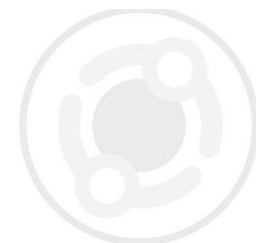
In the Connection Economy, we increasingly base our purchasing or business decisions on the quality of relationship.

new determining factor in not only why I should buy your product, but why I would want to work with you. Your staff, especially those who are in contact with potential and existing clients, need to understand this reality. Today I will be making contact with a door manufacturing company to tell them that their total neglect of not following through on their repeated promise to contact me, has cost them the job. They have a quality product for which I was prepared to pay, however their lack of relational savvy has let them down. In the Connection Economy, we increasingly base our purchasing or business decisions on the quality of relationship.

Well thanks for the opportunity to reflect on your four values. I trust some of these thoughts will be useful in the ongoing conversation that you are having in this area. Our values drive behaviour and so I would encourage you to ensure that your company's values never get reduced to mere words that hang on the wall but rather that they are imprinted on the minds and hearts of all your staff. I would hope that they are lived and experienced on a daily basis by all who are in or come into contact with your company. Conversation in this area is never "done" as with each person who leaves or joins your group, the dynamics change and with that the value expression.

I look forward to our paths crossing again somewhere along the journey. Till then, everything of the best as you lead in these challenging times.

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