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Revisiting Organizational Values for Culture Change Communications

By Susan Berthelot and Mark McElroy

The late business management visionary Peter Drucker reportedly said, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” **Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta** first vice president Marie Gooding recalled this quote when discussing why the bank decided to revisit its organizational values in 2015.

Gooding discussed how culture can define and limit strategy, and that the organization needed to get the culture piece more clearly defined. Bank strategy looked good on paper, and performance was strong. But the culture of the bank—expressed by five organizational values—was not clearly articulated.

In a 2014 survey of hundreds of employees across the bank's district, 50% of respondents said they knew the five values, yet none could name them all. The bank values simply weren't memorable. This realization became the catalyst for a comprehensive values-refresh project.

Project Framework and Environment

The bank's president and first vice president challenged a cross-functional team to come up with a plan to more crisply define the institution's values. A successful project would conclude with a well-received launch of authentic values by 1,600 employees across the Federal Reserve district. The second step would be a deep integration of the values as the foundation for how employees work.

Here's the framework that was adopted for this culture change initiative.

1. **Listen First** (What values resonate with employees? How do they feel about the values?)
2. **Be Authentic** (Do values express how people really feel? What are their individual stories?)
3. **Continue to Connect** (Do values capture and keep people's attention? Are they memorable?)

Bank staff work at seven office locations and more than 200 remote locations. The employee population is diverse in both the demographic sense and in job types. About one-quarter of employees are considered non-desk workers and don't have frequent access to email and intranet communications, so it can be a challenge to reach them.

Another consideration for the audience is long tenure, averaging 14 years. This aspect made it especially important to make the values refresh meaningful for the long term, and not just another “flavor of the month” campaign.

The results and recommendations follow.

Listen First

The first step in a culture change communications project is to send leaders on a listening tour across the organization. Recruit leaders to visit all locations and business lines, to listen to a broad range of employees, in roundtable discussions and in one-on-one meetings.

Next, listen through research. The teams

researched values across the Federal Reserve System and in external organizations, and reflected on the bank's historical values. The research produced two guiding principles: (1) To make the values memorable, it was decided to limit the number of values to three, and (2) the values should be single words, paired with taglines and short, inspirational passages.

When you listen, you may be surprised at the heartening response. 400 bank employees (25% of staff) in six cities shared their ideas with leaders. Employees quickly identified Integrity as the essential bank value, with Excellence and Quality tying for second place. For the third value, a small but vocal group favored Diversity, while a diverse majority of employees favored Respect. Emotionally charged conversations raised concerns that success of this project might be undermined by a debate over words.

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When you encounter debates about key decisions, it is best to trust the process. In this case, bank leaders kept listening.

Motivated by the bank president's sincere desire to "get this right," employee conversations were extended as were moderated meetings to build consensus among officers and senior managers. After additional site visits and meetings, bank leaders felt confident enough to choose Integrity, Excellence and Respect as the refreshed values that would define the institution's culture.

Be Authentic

To be authentic with culture change, you've

got to share ownership. Out of many conversations with employees, three strong themes emerged, and they became the bank's refreshed values. In the bank president's words: "These values are not tablets from on high. They are the articulation of what employees shared with us about how they feel about the organization."

To encourage employee ownership, incorporate their voices in communications. It was decided to pair values presentations with unscripted employee voices, photos and animated word clouds. The rollout plan included an all-employee town hall launch event, talking points for managers, collateral featuring employee faces and voices and an employee six-word story campaign (see sidebar).

Continue to Connect

Following the program launch, the president and first vice president made visits to every bank department to talk about the values and invited employees to submit six-word stories about the values. Within a few months, employees submitted more than 230 stories. Each story represents an individual employee's skin in the game.

For culture-change communications, it's essential to facilitate conversations for the long term while avoiding campaign fatigue. The values have been reinforced with banners, in online video talk shows, in intranet stories of employees living the values and on electronic displays around the bank. In a culture where online commenting on intranet articles is rare, articles on values-related intranet stories regularly receive dozens of comments, with one story receiving 69 comments after publication.

Employees' six-word stories are being integrated into a keepsake booklet, permanent art projects, signage and an online values resource center. Next, the values messages will be integrated into recruitment and onboard-

Atlanta Fed Values, in Six Words

When the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta refreshed its organizational values, leaders wanted employees to take the values to heart and own them personally. The implementation team recommended a six-word stories campaign. Within a few months, more than 230 (of 1,600) employees had submitted original six-word stories.

Background

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. He wrote, "For sale: Baby shoes, never worn." Although some dismiss this as literary folklore, the six-word story was born, and it's been popping around the writing world for years. Six-word stories do not have to be sad—they can be inspirational.

Project Description

The six-word stories project invited employees to own the values by submitting a short statement about how one of the values resonated with them. It was easy to submit stories through an online form.

The project was the cornerstone of how the bank discussed the refreshed values for the long term. The stories appeared on the bank intranet and digital signage, in printed materials and on art installments. Stories were often

paired with a photo of the employee who submitted them.

Guidelines for Great Six-Word Stories

- Personal statements are better than generic ones.
- Be creative—it's your story.
- Think of how a value has touched you, or how you embody a value, or why a value is important to you—then summarize it in six words.
- Your story doesn't have to be poetic; just write about what the value means to you.

Examples of Employee Stories

Value: Integrity

"True to others, true to myself."

"Be the person my dog sees."

Value: Excellence

"Made a mistake. Learned from it."

"We double-check, then check again."

Value: Respect

"We are different yet the same."

"Recognized my marriage before America did."

ing materials, management training and the strategic plan.

Wrapping It Up

For culture-change initiatives, you'll be successful if you put in place a thoughtful process such as Listen First, Be Authentic and Continue to Connect. Plan for a sustainable conversation, and offer personal images and stories all along the way.

In 2015, not one employee knew the bank's values. Today, all of its employees have embraced them as their own. This was validated in the bank's 2016 employee engagement survey, in which 97% of employees responded

favorably to the statement, "I have a good understanding of the values of our bank."

A few months after introducing the refreshed values, the president said it best: "No program in the history of the bank has been so universally praised and so well-received." ■

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