The Foundation of an Ethical Culture

When we talk about an ethical culture, we are discussing a set of basic assumptions that is being lived out. We can talk all we want about those values we want to embody, but without examining the basic assumptions beneath them, we won’t understand how radical a shift we are proposing in the world we inhabit.
In every culture it has studied, the Institute for Global Ethics has found the same five shared ethical values predominant:

- honesty
- responsibility
- respect
- fairness
- compassion

These ethical values define modes of interaction to which individuals aspire, even if they cannot see them manifested fully in their current circumstances. The Institute’s research suggests that these values transcend national and cultural borders, economic stratification, language, gender, and religion.

Organizations, too, hold and express ethical values that determine the ways they treat people within and outside their boundaries. A corporation that truly values honesty, for example, might promote an employee who brings internal wrongdoing to light rather than label her a whistleblower and exile her to an isolated field office. Similarly, that corporation might take an interested, inquisitive approach to customer complaints about a defective product, rather than engaging in cost-benefit analyses for each life that might be lost, or calling in teams of product-liability defense lawyers to prevent these concerns from seeing the light of day.

To get a sense of what living out these shared values might entail, let’s reason backwards from each one until we get a sense of what it might mean to have it embedded in our organization. Recalling Schein’s analysis of the dimensions around which basic assumptions form, we might ask, “If we truly operated with this value (e.g. honesty) as a basic assumption, how would that shape our beliefs and actions in this dimension?”

Imagine, in other words, that you are viewing the world through the lens of each ethical value and asking, “Now that I hold this value, what do I see in and think about the world?” As an analogy, picture how your view of the world changes as you put on a pair of sunglasses. Suddenly, you can comfortably see what is going on in the bright sunlight without squinting. However, your ability to see when you go indoors or walk into a tunnel is impaired. You have to drive more carefully at night, searching for obstacles that used to stand out, but driving during the day is easier and safer.

In the same way, we can try to spell out the changes in our perception of the world that might occur if we lived according to a set of deep ethical values. Some things would be easier, but other things—given the very nature of ethics—would be more challenging. The Values/Assumptions Matrix below builds out some of the ramifications of each core value according to the dimensions around which our basic assumptions form. While hardly comprehensive, it hints at the far-reaching consequences of building an ethical culture.
THE VALUES/ASSUMPTIONS MATRIX

A focus on honesty suggests that . . .

- truth is essential and valued
- the individual and the organization can “handle the truth”
- people can discern what is true and false
- openness and intimacy are the preferred forms of interaction
- humans are basically good, not deceptive
- human activity is not manipulative
- competition and cooperation may occur, but the game must be played in an open fashion
- both leaders and employees can see and contribute to a true understanding of the world
- power comes from open communication and from observing the world as it is

A focus on responsibility suggests that . . .

- the world is defined by the commitments I make
- time is important enough not to waste my own or that of others
- an ethic of care is important for self and others
- an attitude of ownership and accountability is preferred
- human nature is essentially positive and strong
- goodness is active, and each person has a role to play
- real power and authority come from looking beyond oneself, overcoming ambivalence, and bearing the burden

A focus on respect suggests that . . .

- the value and worth of self and others must be paramount
- a consideration for the time and space needed by self and others is important
- human nature is basically positive and worthy of high regard
- the pursuits of others are worthwhile
- others and the world at large should be treated as ends in themselves, not merely as means to some other end
- a collaborative model of life is both possible and desirable
- each individual has a role of importance to play in life
- power and authority must be exercised in a manner that acknowledges the fundamental worth of the other

A focus on fairness suggests that . . .

- each individual has a valuable sense what is real and true
- no individual is fundamentally more important than another
- time is valuable to self and others
- humans are basically good, strong, and responsible
- the dignity of self and other must be honored
human activity may have elements of cooperation and competition within the bounds of fairness
humans will treat each other well, and there exists an ability to restrain one’s self-interest for the sake of the greater good
power and authority come from evenhandedness and from adding to the strength of the community

A focus on compassion suggests that . . .

- reality is defined by our caring relationships with others
- time is used most valuably when in connection with others
- we increase our humanity when we reduce the barriers between self and others
- as humans we all have potential for failings and frailty
- human activity is most meaningful when it brings empathy and connectedness
- human relationships are characterized by understanding, acceptance, and kindness
- strength comes from our relatedness to others, and power comes from joining in the human enterprise

Examining this list, we can begin to sense what it might mean for an organization to have even one of these values fully lived out in its culture. For many organizations, such a change would mean an end to “business as usual.” Indeed, the more closely one looks at this list, the more radically this set of ideas would alter our current group life, and the more distant these ideas might seem to be from present-day actuality.

In reality, it may be impossible to create an organization that lives out a single value in isolation from the others. Making a commitment to one ethical value will tend to cause the organization to live out the others as well. Can you or your organization truly manifest honesty to its highest level and not develop a sense of responsibility as a consequence? If you embody respect, can fairness be far behind? And doesn’t compassion flow from both respect and fairness? Each value opens out into the rest. Just as each fragment of a hologram contains a representation of the entire image, so each value contains within it all the others.

Making a commitment to embrace a single ethical value, then, is a radical step. We are signing on to the entire ethical spectrum—and the consequences that will follow. Are we prepared to change our organizations and create ones where ideas like connectedness, relatedness, and the dignity and inherent worth of each person truly shape our every interaction? This is the sticking point. Most of us espouse the five core values shared around the world. It is when we are asked to live out those values that we may find our resolve wavering. When fairness means restraining my self-interest for the greater good, when responsibility means recognizing the ways in which I am contributing to ongoing problems rather than healing them, when honesty means realizing that my view of what’s going on is not really any more worthy than anyone else’s, when compassion means putting connectedness before power—that’s when our convictions get tested.

So it is with organizations. To begin the process of creating an ethical organization, we must be aware of the magnitude of the task. We must be clear that such deep-seated change is what we want and need. Only then can we ask the more difficult question: What are we willing to give up in order to get what we want?