NORMS AND VALUES

The previous two articles talked about cultures. *Norms* and *values* define culture.

Norms

Norms can be defined as attitudes and behaviours common to members of a particular group, or what they believe is "normal".

For example, most cultures require that people wear clothes. Some even have laws to enforce this dictum: in many western countries, a naked person in public will be arrested with a charge of "indecent exposure".

We have norms about how we speak. How you address your grandmother is probably different to how you talk with your spouse, and this is also different to how you speak to your boss, or your children. Your choice of words, your tone, and your body language are all norm-based.

Nearly everything in human society is governed by norms of some kind. This is why it feels so strange to go to a very different culture, where their norms are so different to what we are used to – but it is normal to them.

As groups, organisations have their own norms. When you move from one job to another, whether between companies, or even within the same organisation, part of learning your new role is not just understanding the tasks you must perform, but also the unwritten rules – the norms – associated with that task.

You will be assimilated!

People talk about conformity like it's a bad thing. Yet imagine if there was no conformity, and we disagreed on what product to manufacture, its colour, which way to distribute it, or even on the cost. We need a certain amount of agreement to get things done: we have to conform in some way.

However, conformity is not good when it causes problems. Here's a practical example. The management of a large organisation noticed that many of their specialist employees were resigning. They paid consultants to prepare a report based on the exit interviews of the employees who left over a six-month period. The report clearly found that the main reason employees were leaving was that they thought their managers were incompetent. The report recommended that managers be properly trained in people skills, and the findings were presented to the upper management board.

The managing director immediately dismissed the report with a wave of his hand. "The number of employees leaving is not very many," he said. "Management training is far too expensive. Anyway, our managers are smart; if they are any good, they should be able to figure it out for themselves. What do these consultants know? They

don't work here. This is not an important issue." The rest of the management group were quick to agree, and moved on to the next item on the agenda.

What happened here? One of the norms in this organisation is: "Agree with the boss, no matter what". Many people in organisations fear a reprisal if they oppose powerful points of view. Another of the norms here is: "Don't admit shortcomings." If the report is accurate, then it also implies that the management board is no good. Yet the board is not willing to correct the situation; they deny it even exists.

Here we have a situation known as *groupthink*: where the group prefers a state of harmony rather than properly evaluate situations. These groups also tend to be overconfident in their own abilities. Groupthink can cause a lot of problems: in this case, the organisation is losing a lot of money by paying the consultants for nothing, losing good employees to the competition, and allowing disruptive problems to continue.

So conformity is not good if it is followed in order to please others or avoid conflict, but it is needed to a certain degree to get work done. Norms, which provide a certain amount of conformity, not only show what is acceptable behaviour within a group, but give a sense of shared values.

Values

Basically, our values are what is important to us. All of us constantly exhibit our values every day. How you think about the car you drive and the environment determines whether you purchase a hybrid car or an SUV. The way we dress tells a lot about your values; do you have an untucked t-shirt and messy hair, or do you wear a button-down collar, blazer, and use a comb? If you are sarcastic in your comments you might value humour in your social relationships, but a person who is always polite may place a higher priority on respect.

Values concentrate on different areas: some may be general life values, but we also have family values, cultural values, and work values. And as people have values, so do organisations. Today, nearly everybody who has worked for a company is familiar with the concept of company values.

Don't do what I do, do what I say

A company's values usually first appear at orientation, and you will probably be reminded of them at various times during your employment. Perhaps you hold them dearly, you can recite them, and believe you apply them on a daily basis. You may feel that values unite the organisation into a common way of thinking. These are the *espoused values* of the company: the values the company says it has.

But what does the company actually do? How does it really treat its employees, its customers, the environment? These are the *values-in-action*, or the values the company puts into practice.

Imagine an innovative engineering company where one of its values is "Teamwork". The manager of a research team claims that as the manager, he is responsible for all of his team's new ideas, and even files the patents for them in his own name. He is then given awards for the high number of patents he has filed. The company is rewarding individual effort, which contradicts its value of teamwork. Employees may start to hide their work from the manager, to keep the patent in their own name. Over time, this can become a norm in the organisation.

People sometimes join companies because their personal values match the company's values. However, employees become disillusioned when the company's espoused values do not match its values-in-action. In a person, this kind of behaviour is called hypocrisy, and nobody likes a hypocrite.

In brief

The norms and values of any organisation define its culture. Norms are the attitudes and behaviours of the members of that organisation, and the values are what are important to those members. Norms give a sense of shared values, but values can also create their own norms.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

The Theories of Chris Argyris
http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm

Try the search term "company values" and see what appears
http://www.google.com

Social norms in action
http://www.socialnorms.org/index.php

Next month, we will be discussing groupthink in more detail.

References:

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Lefkowitz, J. (2003). *Ethics and values in industrial-organizational psychology.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pennington, D.C., Gillen, K., & Hill, P. (2004). *Social psychology.* London: Arnold, Hodder Headline Group.