



Does your organization have a “Leadership Code”? Does it matter?

By John Higgins

Several years ago, we were in a very fast paced growth mode acquiring new companies and adding a lot of new teams and leaders every year. This growth was exciting, and our new employees were excited to be a part of very bright future. We had a great story to tell, solid performance results, what seemed like lots of highly engaged employees, and still lots of growing pains. It was a very exciting time!

One of the biggest challenges we faced with this growth was finding ways to ensure our strategy, values and disciplined operating principles were being taught and lived across all teams and leaders. We knew that this had to come from the competencies and behaviour of our leaders. How to best ensure this was going happen was a very big question and that’s when we began our discussion about “Leadership Training & Development”.

During one of these early discussions the question was posed, “Can anyone here describe what an exceptional leader looks like, sounds like and acts like in our organization?”. What belief systems do they have, how do they treat employees, how do they act in a crisis, what do they do when the chips are down, how do they build people up, how do they handle difficult conversations, do they share their knowledge and experience, etc. This brought the whole room to a very quiet pause. The second very challenging question was, “how can you design a leadership development experience if you can’t articulate what it is you are trying to develop to”?

For the next several hours and days we tried to flip chart out what the answers to these questions should look like. What became very evident was how different we each saw “Leadership Excellence”. Each one of the executive team came through very different leadership experiences over their careers and all had exceptional ideas and contributions to this discussion. As we were getting closer to defining “Leadership Excellence” in our organization the next challenging question surfaced, “Would our frontline leaders and employees see it and describe it the same way?”

This set us off on an interesting quest to find out how all levels in our organization defined “Excellence in Leadership”. Over the next few months we surveyed the organization and it was amazing to see how engaged the employees became with this question. We received input from all areas of our organization and from across three countries. With all the data received, we diligently worked through it looking for common themes, key words and experiences that best described “Excellence in Leadership”. After writing and reviewing several drafts we had our organizations first ‘Leadership Code’.

The “Leadership Code” has six sections that spell out a leadership “VISION” for the organization. Values, Integrity, Self-Lead, Intelligence, Order and Navigator. Each section had three to four statements that described “Excellence in Leadership” behaviours and attributes. We were very pleased and surprised when our “Organizational Values” became a significant theme in the “Leadership Code”. Now that we had this, we could start the process of developing educational material, exercises and experiences that would teach “Leadership Excellence”. The other big step we took was presenting this to all the employees in the organization and having large framed prints posted in highly visible areas.

Over the next few years we saw the real benefits of this important exercise. We watched our employees having highly engaged conversations around leadership, our leadership behaviours started to change, our organizational “Values” became a very big part of our DNA, and the growth of our new young leaders was amazing.

The other very significant thing we did with the “Leadership Code” was the development of a twice-yearly employee survey on how our leaders were living out the “Code”. Each person in a leadership role had their direct reports assess how they were doing. The results of these surveys became an immensely valuable coaching tool for the senior leaders.

In Mark Hannum’s new book “Become: The Path to Purposeful Leadership” he talks about an Organizational Leadership Code. He says, “*when organizations don’t have leadership rules of the road, or principles of leadership, sorting our good leaders from bad can be difficult. Without a written code of leadership, standards can be quickly become altered to accommodate whatever is happening in the moment. Once an organization has its leadership road rules, the organizations credibility and trustworthiness depend on upholding those standards.*”

In my experience a “Leadership Code” is a very powerful tool for teaching and making “Leadership Excellence” a defining part of your corporate culture and engraining organizational values into your DNA. When you ask your leadership team, what does “Leadership Excellence” look like, sound like and act like in your organization, what answers will you get?

Does your organization have a “Leadership Code”? Does it matter? You decide.

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