ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS: UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

B Y   M I C H E L A N N   Q U I M B Y

Does your company struggle with customer satisfaction? Do your employees fully engage with the mission and values of your organization on your customers' behalf? Sometimes it seems as if all the policies, procedures, and propaganda we put into place have little effect on company culture, employee engagement, and customer service.

But, often, we are unaware of how our behavior may contradict stated employee policies and organizational values. Are you cognizant of all the intended and unintended ways you communicate with your employees? Fully engaged employees are essential for customer satisfaction. Thus, it is crucial to understand all the ways we communicate expectations to them.

Symbolic Action and Dissonance

Most companies claim to value employees. Visit any well-known organization's employment page, and you will likely find phrases like "competitive benefits and salary," "superior employee development," and "work hard, play hard." But what happens when a manager's behavior or an employee policy directly conflicts with these assertions?

Managers and organizations frequently misunderstand the relationship between their behavior and employee performance. Two key concepts in this realm are *symbolic action* and *dissonance*:
Symbolic Action—behaviors and actions that inform employee perceptions
Dissonance—emotional discomfort resulting from observing hypocritical speech or action

Here are two examples of symbolic actions that can create dissonance and possible negative employee reactions:

Example: New employee training emphasizes leadership's "open-door policy." But a high-level manager keeps his office door closed most of the time and only talks to his direct reports a couple of times a week.
Possible Interpretation: The company is only paying lip service to bottom-up communication.
Impact: Frustration resulting from hypocrisy, lowered productivity, poor internal communication

Example: Stated organizational values include respect for employees, but firings are frequent, and one or more executives have been overheard referring to employees as "expendable."
Possible Interpretation: Respect for employees is an empty claim, probably designed to influence employees to work harder.
Impact: Low morale, increased attrition

Symbolic actions, intended or not, tell your employees how much you value them, whether or not you trust them, how intelligent and capable you think they are, and your perception of your own value compared to theirs. How does this concept play out in organizations? Here a couple of real-world examples from my own observations.

Customer Service

I frequent a couple of national coffee chains for my daily latte. One chain has a good product and excellent staff. No matter how long the line, I can get in and out in under 10 minutes, and my embarrassingly complex order is always delivered correctly. The employees are competent, relaxed, and friendly. They're diverse in age, race, appearance, and personality.

Occasionally, I frequent another chain. I actually like their coffee better. The employees, generally all young, are disengaged. Sometimes they're friendly, sometimes not. My order is frequently messed up—even when I'm the only customer. The employees generally seem more interested in talking to each other than to me.

Employee Policies. Curious about this disparity, I visited the websites for the two companies. I noticed an immediate difference on the employment page. While the second chain has the standard boilerplate about "putting people first" and competitive pay and benefits, the first has personal testimonials, documentation of fairly advanced training for the food service industry, and an itemized list of available benefits including retirement and insurance for employees who work 20 hours a week or more. Symbolically, this would seem to communicate that the first chain is much more committed to employee development than the second.

The first chain's website leaves me with the impression that leadership wants employees to feel valued and engaged. But does this mean that they actually are? Many companies wish to be perceived this way, but sometimes PR (websites, press releases, articles, and books) and reality diverge. The intention to hire and retain good employees does not always translate into the actions—hiring practices, training, and culture—that are necessary to sustain it.

TEAM TIP

Look at whether your organization's actions are consistent with its words.

For example, I have a relative who works for a national retail chain that has its home office in the Southwestern U.S. The temperature in her store (on the West Coast) is regulated from the home office, so it's often out of sync with the weather outside. If it's 95 degrees at headquarters and the air conditioning is cranked way up, customers and employees may be freezing in the store on the West Coast, where it's only 75 degrees outside. Corporate does not allow store managers to adjust the temperature in their own stores. So while the company's website details extensive career development and benefits available to employees, this lip service to employee value does not align with how they are treated.

If you were an employee of this company, what would this policy tell you about your value as an employee? Would you feel empowered and understood? Or would you feel frustrated and powerless? Good leaders recognize that any disparity between what they say and what they do can have a negative impact on their employees' effectiveness, and by extension their own. Whether they like it or not, their actions are symbolic of their intentions —toward the company, the employees, and each other.

Employee Engagement. The first coffee chain talks a good game, and the values they espouse seem to be in use in the organization. Here are some key indicators:
• The company provides useful training and benefits for employees that are far beyond the industry norm.
• Employees seem engaged and relaxed.
• Employees are highly competent and efficient.

On a recent visit to the second coffee chain, the employee who took my order was discussing some new employee rules with his coworker. Management had decided that employees were only allowed to come in through the front door, even though the side door is far more convenient for café employees. It was clear that the workers found this policy frustrating.

This revelation made perfect sense.

Regardless of what the company said about how they value their employees, their actions indicate (at least to this particular employee) that they don't trust them. If I were to translate this action into a statement, it would say, "I (the company) do not trust you (the employee) to make basic decisions about how to act, so I will dictate how you should behave." As an employee, I would feel that my individual value to the organization was negligible.

Is it a surprise that employees of the second company don't seem to take pride in their work? Company policies toward employees communicate far more than employee value statements or titles like "partner" or "team member."

It's entirely possible that management had a good and valid reason for making the rule about entering through the front door; however, what is important in this case is the unintended ways that this data was interpreted by the employees. Every rule, regulation, or manager action can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Worse still, if the action or policy directly contradicts the organization's stated values regarding employees, the obvious hypocrisy will hurt morale, and potentially lower efficiency and raise attrition. If you don't want to run the risk of creating unnecessary ill will that negatively impacts customer service, you need to consider these possibilities when crafting employee policies.

I suspect the first company's employees seem happy and engaged because there is little conflict between what the company says about how they treat employees and how they actually treat them. This alignment translates directly into satisfied repeat customers and revenue.

Putting It to Work

Do your company's values align with the policies in practice regarding employees? If you cite respect and honesty as core values but monitor employees' every move, you're creating dissonance that could negatively affect the quality of work. Dissonance is often unconscious, at least temporarily, but it still has an impact on employee commitment, morale, and efficiency. If your stated values are instead consistency and quality,

then close monitoring may be more appropriate. It is the dissonance between words and actions that can cause problems like employee disengagement, low productivity, and high turnover.

If your organization, like a coffee shop, relies on consistent, attentive customer service for its revenue stream, then this internal dissonance may also create discomfort for the customer. Imagine taking your kids to Disneyland and being ignored by grumpy, disinterested employees. The slogan "The Happiest Place on Earth" would become a parody, rather than a promise. Your employees represent the values you communicate directly to your customers.

Here are some suggestions to help you craft appropriate employee policies:

• **Be Consistent.** If you have a company vision and values statement, check it against your employee policies and see if they contradict each other. If so, consider changing your policies to reflect your company values, or even changing your values statement if it is outdated or underdeveloped.
• **Be Authentic.** If you haven't developed a values statement, spend some time considering what your company pays the most attention to and how that informs employee decisions. Develop a document that accurately reflects your priorities so it can guide your future decisions. This will help you recognize if policy and values begin to diverge. Make sure that your product or brand values are also aligned with your core values.
• **Look at the Big Picture.** Consider the long-term impact of short-term decisions. When times are tight and cutbacks are necessary, don't be caught unaware if layoffs lower employee morale, productivity, and commitment. Remember the power of symbolic actions and find ways to mitigate the negative impact of difficult decisions. Otherwise, you risk losing the benefit of short-term gains to long-term problems. ◘

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