

## In Search of a Company's Core Values

*By Ann N. Gatty, Ph.D.*

I had the distinct honor of interviewing some high school seniors competing for a scholarship to a higher education university. I sat on a panel with two other individuals. We asked questions to learn more about each candidate's qualifications. We focused our investigation on learning more about levels of character, leadership, and scholarship. These were top notch students, with many accolades and accomplishments. However, it was our job to select the best from this cream of the crop.

The process reminded me of how we work with business leaders to help them forge realistic business plans for future company growth. When we work with leaders to build their business strategies, we talk about the alignment necessary between the company's core values and its culture. We know that if a culture is not aligned with the core values held by leadership, then successfully accomplishing business strategies will fail. But identifying core values can be illusive. These values are actually illustrated in what people do. What people do proves what people believe. Here is an illustration about discovering inherent values. Let me describe the questioning of one of the student candidates.

One of my interviewing team was very interested in learning more about the candidate's perspective on leadership. He asked the following question: "From this list of 5 leadership traits, which is the most important? Tact, initiative, decisiveness, integrity, or courage?" The candidate thought for a moment and then selected courage. He explained that one needs courage to lead individuals into unknown situations where the outcome was uncertain. A leader needs courage to believe in oneself and depend on others. Courage to implement in the face of challenge. The candidate was quite persuasive and articulate in his answer. Yet, according to the interviewer, the correct answer should be integrity. Integrity is defined as the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles.

But, in my opinion, the candidate had demonstrated his integrity trait by answering the previous question. The first question put before him was to describe a conflict that had occurred in his life and describe how he resolved the conflict. This candidate talked about being the captain of his high school hockey team. The team had recently lost two very close games and after the second loss, two of the team members started throwing punches in the locker room. This captain took both boys aside (let's call them Bobby and Joe) and talked with them together asking each what they found to be the problem with the other. The first, Bobby, said his teammate, Joe, didn't try hard enough. The second, Joe, felt that Bobby didn't take the game seriously and made too many mistakes. The captain asked the two to develop a solution so that they could restore the relationship and get along as they played future games. The captain and team mates talked things over and explained that they would help each other play better in the future. The captain allowed Bobby and Joe to honestly describe their point of view and sincerely worked to develop and principled resolution.

This candidate, describing his role as hockey team captain, had described integrity. It is a leadership trait, ingrained in his character. So ingrained, that it didn't occur to him that this trait would be considered the most important leadership trait from the above mentioned list. He selected a trait that took more focus from him to exhibit. Courage was a trait that was more voluntary for him—like moving a voluntary muscle in the body. Integrity was a trait so ingrained it was involuntary for him—like breathing.

Many times, our values and character traits become so deeply embedded in our daily living patterns that we no longer notice them as being distinct and implicit. When business leaders look to define the core values that their company embraces, it is important to look further than identifying from a list of terms, those values that seemingly fit. Leaders must delve into the patterns found in the way the business operates, the key partnerships forged, the resources utilized, and the client relationships maintained. Identifying such patterns is more likely to indicate what's important to the people working the business. By looking at what is actually happening—not what is intended to happen—a leader can discover the values that the business reflects. If the values are not those that leadership deems to be in alignment with core values they would like, change is necessary.

**About the author. Dr. Ann Gatty** is a partner at Drs. Gatty, LLC, a business consulting firm, helping businesses add value-assets to their businesses. For the past twenty years she and her husband, Gene, have been providing business leadership mentoring and solving HR employment issues. Ann has recently created **The Business Sphere of Excellence**® a strategic business planning model used to construct annual and long range business plans helping businesses run more efficiently and profitably.

Dr. Gatty is an expert in understanding and improving the workplace culture which is foundational for implementing any successful strategic initiatives. In order to better explain the importance of employee engagement, Ann partners with Beretta, her Great Dane therapy dog to present her key findings.

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