

Demystifying and Arresting Value Erosion: Competence-building to change the paradigm

The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.

– Wilhelm Stekel

It has been some time since my paper on 'Value Erosion in Organisations and society' was published in *Here & Now*. I have walked some more distance in my exploration of the subject in the world around us. My interest in and commitment to the theme has been responded to by a number of organisations' desire to work in Values and culture building and providing me opportunity and to learn more and deepen my work. This has resulted in developing some models and an approach towards dealing with the vicious circle of value erosion in organisations and society faced with the challenges and pressures of competition and constant change.

ISABS as an institution and the ISABS community is also currently faced with the challenge of upholding and nurturing the values it stands for while being ready for growth in the Global era. People in ISABS membership need to set a model of organisational effectiveness while nurturing the values of trust, openness, authenticity, voluntarism within the institution and with their client systems. Hence this paper, which may be of interest to this community.

The Common Prevailing Scenario

The awareness about the significance of beliefs, values and culture for an organization began at least four decades ago. Watson, Jr. in *IBM and its Beliefs* stated that in order to succeed, survive and grow an organization must have a sound set of beliefs and should faithfully adhere to them. Tom Peters in his famous book *In search for Excellence* also said, "Every excellent company we studied is clear on what it stands for, and takes the process of value shaping seriously." Values impact decisions and the values upheld by managerial decisions also determine the organization culture. However, in most organizations, even today, the work on values and culture building is perceived as an idealistic or image-building exercise and receives peripheral, sporadic and low priority attention. Often it starts and ends with creating a statement of organizational values but the values are often not brought into practice.

Professional management education in India has come a long way and includes a wide spectrum of subjects, but values get almost negligible attention except occasional optional courses on ethics, social responsibility, Indian values, etc. conducted in a prescriptive and normative mode which fails to bridge the gap between ideals and practice.

In my sessions with managers and even management students, they state that their values are honesty, integrity, sincerity, truth, helping, openness, responsibility to the society etc. Management education does not seem to validate/support these values or build the capacity to bring these values into practice. On the contrary, management graduates often begin to believe

that their values are not relevant in the world of work. The process of management education however, consciously or unconsciously does nurture certain attitudes and values. Competition, winning, succeeding, material success, giving priority to personal benefits for survival are some of the attitudes cultivated through management education which are reflected in the choices of managers at work.

At the same time, often a concern is expressed by people about the gap between stated and practiced values in organizations and the degeneration/erosion of values in society. People want things to change, but they feel quite helpless in making that change happen. Most often people believe that their intentions to build a desired culture are sincere and their helplessness is also real. Values are consciously or unconsciously important to people but the energy around the issue of values is focused on feeling a victim of circumstances, constraints, pressures etc. rather than enabling oneself to practice one's own values and making a difference. Life today is full of alternatives but we often find ourselves experiencing a sense of meaninglessness even in the midst of apparently active and successful life. There also seems to be a tug of war between traditional/family ideals, emerging values in the changing society and the practices of people.

In my interactions with people over the last two decades during workshops aimed at clarifying personal/organizational values, some significant data has been generated. The results are revealing. The five most important values people most frequently state are: Honesty, Dedication, Respect for People, Family and Sincerity, with 'Honesty' at the top. But in the five most important values listed as practiced, Selfishness and Self-centredness comes first, and Corruption, Greed for Money, etc. find a place in the first five in addition to Honesty and Dedication.

This data is both affirming and alarming. Affirming because at some level most people seem to at least prefer the seemingly positive values. Alarming because the perceived practices are far behind and contrary to the preferred ones. Following are the main repetitive patterns:

- ❖ A gap between the values people think they hold, and what they practice and what others see them as practicing.
- ❖ There is also a tremendous gap between the values upheld in decisions and the desired organizational values.
- ❖ At an individual level, the gap between practices and ideals seems to move towards upholding the self-interest related choices of success, family happiness, dishonesty, corruption, pursuit of money and wealth etc. instead of the stated values of honesty, integrity, dedication, respect and concern for people etc. At the group level the traditional concepts of stability, obedience, security, safety, etc. take precedence over freedom, courage, trust, openness, experimentation etc.

The story repeats itself

There is a great similarity in the story, which repeats itself in every group that I meet. These patterns then seem to form a vicious circle which moves from individual choices to the groups, organization and to society with multiplying effect and at any point of time the system finds it

difficult to practice values because the individuals in it are not practicing them and the individuals are unable to do it because of the system.

This state of affairs is the outcome of a pattern or paradigm of relating to values which involves knowledge, skills as well as attitudes. There are two paradigms possible.

The paradigm of helplessness and incongruence

It involves lack of awareness about the concept of values, one's own values and practices, operating in life based on fears, habits, expectations of others and to avoid pain rather than seeking meaning and well being. It is also associated with an attitude of judging oneself and others by differing standards, blindness to the larger entity and one's impact on it and expecting change to be initiated by others. It is further supported by lack of skills to deal with conflict within oneself and with others and an unquestioned pursuit of some preset materialistic goals even at the cost of values. The lack of adequate knowledge, skills and the above-mentioned attitudes result in a state of inevitable gap between stated and practiced values, helplessness, regret, being a victim and blaming others and circumstances.

The paradigm of values as an area of competence.

This paradigm views practice of one's values as a competence which can be learnt, practiced and developed but it involves giving up the preference for perceived blissful ignorance and powerlessness. It means knowing about values and one's own values, one's practices, working for congruence between the two, and seeing the impact of one's practices on the larger entity and supporting people who make value-based choices. It also means an attitude of courage and willingness to pay the price for one's cherished values, to seek meaning and well-being rather than seek the safety of habits and fulfilling the expectations of others. It means practicing and developing skills to prioritize, integrate, and negotiate values within self and with others.

In short, in one paradigm of relating to values, they are disowned and seen as a quality possessed by a few who tend to and are expected to continue to act as martyrs and pay the price. The second paradigm views practice of Values as a competence that can be possessed by many or all and can be developed by clarifying and constructing values.

Developing Competence in Values to Change the Paradigm

Quite often people choose the first paradigm. In management, while for most areas of managerial/leadership behaviour, source is seen as some skill/knowledge and are considered teachable and learnable but values, which affect managerial behaviour, are not seen as an area of competence. Most models of competency include many skills but not values. It is commonly believed that some people have the right values while others do not. Data shows to the contrary. Most people have good values, intend to have good practices also but most do not seem to practice the values they state. What comes in the way is lack of clarity, courage, certain attitudes and lack of skills.

However, movement to the second paradigm is possible. Competence to practice the values is a combination of clarity, courage and capabilities. A process is available which can help people develop the competence to practice values.

Interventions for change

There are certain processes, which are at the root of the gap between the values people, cherish, state and practice. Value Clarification workshops typically address these and important learnings emerge for individuals and groups to be able to make a change in their lives as individuals, start relating differently to organizational reality and influencing it.

Through various stages of work in Value Clarification, people can go deeper into their own values and discover and prioritize their significant values. Through the various learning events, they also see indicators of their practice when they are faced with limited resources and conflicting situations and learn to integrate the pursuit of complementary/conflicting values. They explore the impact of their decisions on their own lives and on the systems they are in. They also begin to observe the group dynamics and their own behaviour when value differences emerge, begin to break barriers, pick up skills to influence others and evolve group solutions respecting the values of group members. They also pick up leadership skills with a stronger sense of values, greater courage and capacity to practice values and to pay the price for their choices. They can model the practice of values, help others clarify values and inspire them rather than imposing values. They learn to evolve shared value systems in the organization with the participation of people.

Value Clarification interventions for individuals and organizations are based on the paradigm of viewing values as a competence which can be enhanced both at an individual and organizational level. Figures 1 and 2 show models for developing individual and organizational competence in values.

Figure 1

Values as a Competence

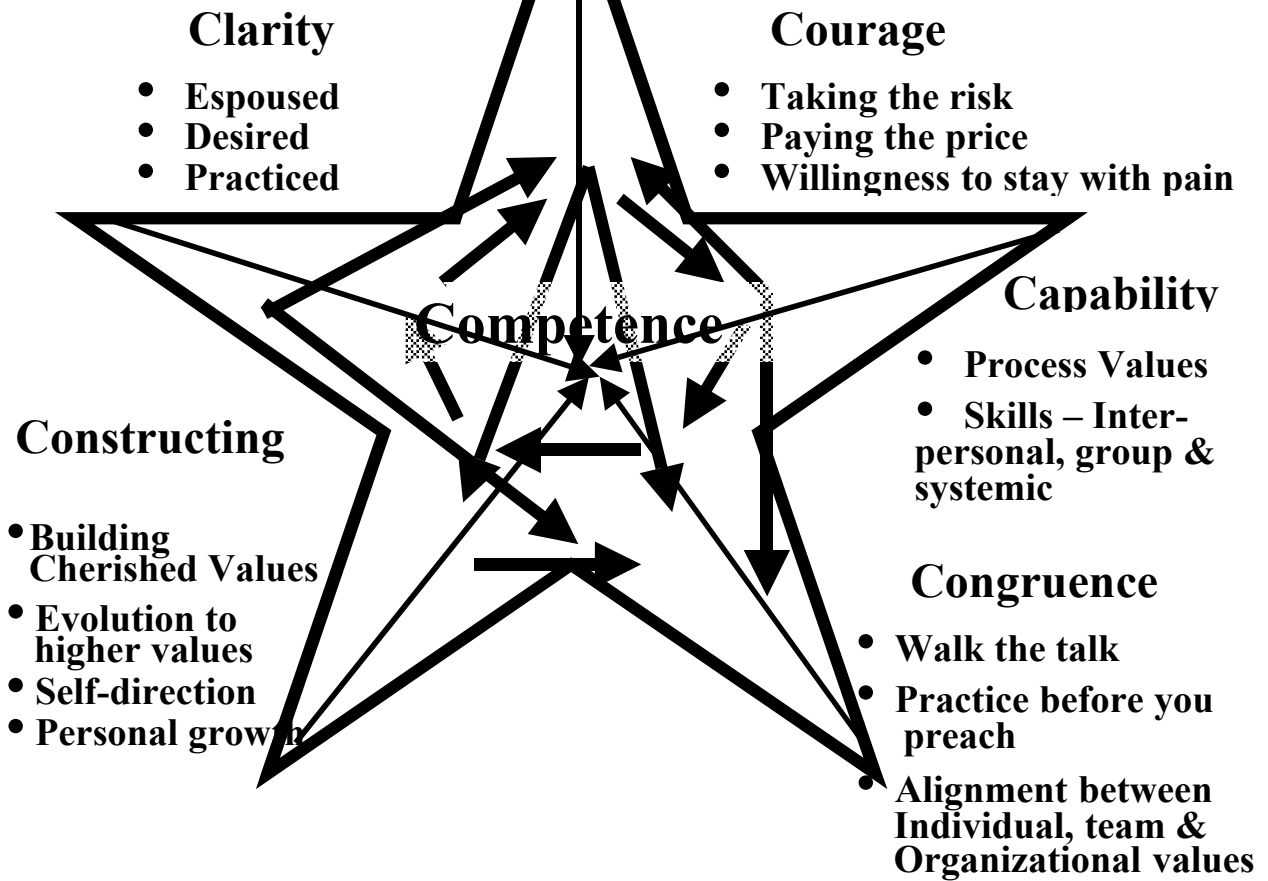


Figure 2

Culture Building Processes & Competencies



Practice of values in societies is similar to a non-zero sum game, where winning of one party cannot be at the cost of others. The only real way to win is if all win. Otherwise, it ultimately leads to a state where everyone will lose or at best some will lose less than others. Therefore, as individuals and organizations start operating closer to the desired values, it will facilitate social change. If people who are influential and in influential positions in organizations go through Value Clarification exercises and make changes in their practice, the impact will be larger and faster and the value-oriented people will not have to pay such a heavy price. If a significant number of people engage in such exercises, this vicious circle can be converted into a strategic spiral of change in the desired directions.

In a society driven by the perceived imperatives of the organized, corporate and industrial sector, the practices, if not real values, are getting directed by business organizations to a significant extent. These organizations, therefore, can play a significant role in change. The corporations and other organizations need to play a role in helping people clarify values, evolve values through participation of people and create mechanisms and practices for rewarding the practice of values. Watson brings out this point effectively: “Businessmen aren’t the only ones at fault, and they can’t effect this change alone; every other element of our society is going to have to do

its part. But someone is going to have to set a standard and this, I believe, we businessmen can do”.

There is a story I would like to quote in this connection:

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a coal-mouse asked a wild dove.

“Nothing more than nothing”, was the answer.

“In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story,” the coal-mouse said. “I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow – not heavily, not in a raging blizzard – no, just like in a dream, without a wound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch, nothing more than nothing, as you say – the branch broke off.”

Having said that, the coal-mouse flew away.

The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself, “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come to the world.”

Source: Jaworski, 1996

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