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Exploring Corporate Values:
A Starting Point

Introduction

The clothes people wear, the experiences they share, and the objects they display can all serve to unlock an organization's values and priorities.

As the starting point for an informal exercise in corporate anthropology, here are a few questions to help bring these cultural cues to light.

We originally developed the questions on which these are based to help a bank unearth the anecdotes and artifacts that would evoke its core beliefs. The bank wanted to share this content through a series of collage-y vignettes presented to key clients in the form of a bound and printed book.

Early into the content development effort, we ran into a couple of snags. First, the bank's existing stock of stories was pretty thin. Its official archives suggested only a few. Second, visual support for these stories was also scant—for the most part, not much more than old photographs and brittle newsprint.

In past “corporate values spelunking” exercises, we have personally visited an organization's offices (and sometimes also its offsite events) to discover and document what the environments themselves might tell us. Together with extensive interviews, this work has unearthed all manner of insights—and no shortage of useful anecdotes.

Since the Discovery phase of our work for the bank came during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, we drafted a set of questions much like these to help the bank's project team conduct an investigation on our behalf.

Our main advice to them: “The key to making the best use of the questions is simply to research or answer them without pre-judging them or trying to anticipate what they might yield.”

What other questions might be useful to ask? We'd love to hear from you.

15 Questions: Artifacts of Corporate Values and Culture

1. What corporate art does the organization have hanging in its various locations—in particular, in its headquarters lobby? Who chooses it? Using what criteria?
2. Aside from the furniture, what objects or artifacts are permanent fixtures in the corporate meeting room(s)?
3. Where do employees gather informally? Why there?
4. To what charities has the organization made significant donations? What policies or priorities have guided the selection of these charities?
5. Does the organization host any company activities (picnics, concerts, etc.)? What are some of the highlights of these activities?
6. Does the organization give out any gifts to its clients during the holidays (or, for that matter, at other occasions)? If so, what are some examples and how have they been chosen?
7. Conversely, has the organization received any particularly memorable gifts from clients?
8. Does the organization have a formal dress code? An informal one? If so, how has the dress code changed over the years?
9. What is the onboarding process for new hires? What materials do they receive?
10. Are there any places where music is played, either on special occasions or as a matter of course? If so, what is the music, and how is it chosen?
11. Has an interior designer or architect been engaged to renovate, reconfigure or redecorate the space? What changes were made? What guided the designer's work and the organization's choices?
12. What channels of communication, both formal and informal, do employees use to talk to each other? How intensively are they used? What kinds of conversations take place?
13. What kinds of objects appear in people's workspaces? Which are personal?
14. What evidence do you find of handwritten or informally printed notices? Who wrote them and why?
15. Where do people take their lunch and what do they eat? To judge by the amenities and food offerings the organization itself provides, how much importance does it attach to food?

10+1 Questions: Personal Narratives

The stories people tell about their life in an organization might bring specific values to life. Some of the stories might be significant enough to share in their own right. At other times, the stories people share might point the way to other, bigger stories that involve larger groups of people. After we identify any stories we might want to develop further, we can identify the right visuals to accompany them. Note that these visuals might be symbolic in nature and might not belong or pertain to the organization in a literal sense.

1. Can you tell us about a time that you felt a deep sense of pride in the organization? What triggered that feeling?
2. Can you think of a moment when you learned something interesting about the organization that you hadn't known before?
3. Can you think of a time when a more senior or experienced employee shared a piece of information that helped you to be more successful?
4. Can you tell us about a time when a colleague did something that impressed you for its thoughtfulness, skill or consideration?
5. Can you share an example of exceptional customer service that you have seen at the organization?
6. If you worked at a peer or competitor before joining, what impressed you about this organization as being different from where you were before?
7. What interesting or unusual experiences do you recollect from your first days here?
8. Have you ever had an experience here that made you laugh?
9. Have you or your fellow employees ever done something for a colleague that you found especially considerate or touching?
10. Did you or someone you know ever transgress an unwritten rule or norm? What was it?
11. If you'd like to be remembered for one thing you accomplished here, what would it be?