

From the Academy Director

On the Importance of Values

BY ED HOFFMAN

“If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.” —Charlie Parker



In the early 1980s, I was involved in conducting a study to determine the effectiveness of a new initiative promoting a more participative organization, interviewing employees and managers.

One young woman assured me that leadership had no interest in a more participative environment. I gently disagreed, pointing to efforts under way to promote participation—quality circles, training, and employee–manager dialogues. She countered by telling me about her recent experience. She had returned from a quality circle and was offering ideas for the office. Her manager told her, “Look, you’ve had your four hours of quality-circle participation; for the rest of the week, just do what I tell you.” Over the next month of interviews, I discovered that her experience was typical. There was a complete disconnect between what managers believed and their superficial support of this change initiative.

The more management pushed formal participation programs, the more employees considered the change to be insincere. In my briefing to leadership, I recommended placing much less emphasis on formal tools such as quality-circle groups, a recommendation that came as a jolt to senior leaders.

This experience motivated my dissertation research on “the impact of the managerial belief system on participative behavior.” I concluded that, when managers do not really believe in an organizational change, their informal behaviors communicating that lack of support are more powerful than formal approval.

Leader values and beliefs communicate to a team what really matters, but few project managers and teams take time to address the importance of values to their mission. This lost opportunity contributes to dangerous disconnects between desired and actual performance.

NASA has four core values—safety, integrity, teamwork, and excellence—and projects have unique requirements that make additional values essential to success. For example, the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite (LCROSS) project depended on low-risk integration, intense partnering, and trust-building communication. NASA project manager Dan Andrews and industry project manager Steve Carman, Northrop Grumman, clearly communicated these core values to the team. (Read about LCROSS at www.nasa.gov/offices/oc/e/appe/knowledge/publications/lcross.html.)

And look at how safety, excellence, teamwork, and integrity play out in the STS-119 Flight Readiness Review: www.nasa.gov/offices/oc/e/appe/knowledge/publications/STS-119.html.

Successful leaders embody desired project values and tell stories that amplify them. Practice and talk about open communication and that’s what you get; show and talk about lack of trust and you get that. It is no accident that the stories of successful and unsuccessful projects sound so different.

Every project team should take the time to clarify their critical values and beliefs, asking the following:

1. What values will drive us to success?
2. Are our behaviors consistent with those values?
3. Are the stories we tell about our project (and each other) helping or hindering our performance?
4. Do we have a governance framework consistent with our values?

Charlie Parker said you need to live it for it to come out of your horn. Leaders and teams need to live—and talk about—the value that drives their projects. ●