

## FOUR CONVERSATIONS TO ALIGN CORE VALUES

Through trial and error, I've discovered that four conversations are necessary before everyone truly feels aligned with—and committed to—their organization's core values.

The first conversation is how each person interprets the core values. You begin by handing people a copy of the core values and then asking a simple question: "Would you agree that these are the things most essential to our organization's success?"

This conversation enables people to discover their common ground—and areas of disagreement. The disagreement is healthy and critical, for it furnishes an opportunity for important dialogue and a chance for people to discover a deeper connection to the value than first appeared. The danger is not that people won't unite around the core values; it's that they will unite too quickly, thus avoiding the tough conversations that build understanding and trust.

The second conversation explores the difference between organizational core values and personal core values. This discussion is best handled by asking people to say: "What's most important to you, personally? How does it tie to the organization's core values?" This conversation enables people to articulate their own values (often for the first time). It gives people a chance to know one another, to appreciate their differences, and to reflect on the fact that their differences are born of deeply held beliefs. For example, an employee of a large retail chain said his greatest passion was painting natural landscapes. He then pointed out that his love of painting shared a surprising connection with excellent customer service. "You have to find hidden delight in each and every encounter," he said.

The third conversation applies the organization's values to real cases. It's constructive to look back at times when the organization was not true to its values. Without casting blame, people can ask what happened. Looking forward, they can anticipate scenarios in which the values might again be challenged.

The conversation can begin by asking: "Looking at how we've defined the organization's core values, think of a time when we did not uphold these. What happened? How did we make decisions that led us to that point? What could we do differently in the future in our communication and decision making to forestall it from happening again?"

The final conversation is translating the core values into performance objectives for each job classification. People need to understand that the "we statements" are not philosophical fluff—they will be appraised based on how closely their behaviors align with the behaviors tied to each core value. This is what creates a powerful linkage and an integrated performance management system.