



Compassion **@work**

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**Creating
Workplaces
That Engage the
Human Spirit**

*A Collection of Insights from
Leading HR and OD Experts*

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Chapter 1



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“Compassion@Work – Who Cares?”

Compassion, like any other value, is in the eyes of the beholder. Values have different meaning to different people in different roles. Are values personal barometers for my personal life or the way I want to lead my team at work? Are values driven and applied differently across different small teams within a larger organization, or are the values established at the top ultimately used to set the tone for the expected behavior from many employees across a broad geographic area?

No two people perceive values the same way. How one person perceives compassion, respect, responsiveness or any other value will be different from the next. To reduce conflict that comes from perception differences, organizations, work groups, teams and families can reduce conflict by identifying values that govern expected behavior and create an understanding of behaviors that complement and or conflict with the values. In this chapter, I'll share my journey of learning to articulate, identify and hardwire expectations around service values, including the exercise of compassion at work.

Birth of the Four Rules

The first practical application of values started at home, when our oldest daughter Lauren was about 14 years old, and she was playing me and her mother against each other. We were having one of those discussions when I let her know that I had to have a relationship with her until she was 18; after that, it was as much my decision as hers. As the conversation continued, I suggested that the way our relationship would evolve during the next four years was up to her. Continuing, I said, “I’m not a fan of purple hair or earrings in places other than ears, but I’ll deal with that if we can comply with the Four Rules: Trust, Respect, Balance and Grades.”

We talked about decision-making and illustrating a timeline, and we talked about having a long view. The whole discussion lasted 15 minutes.

Little did anyone know that the Four Rules would become the foundation for teaching Lauren and our three other children how to think about their decisions. Whenever one of the kids was making a decision that I took issue with, we’d talk about it; then I’d ask, “which of the Four Rules does this conflict with?” We would chat. At the end of the discussion, the final questions were, “Are mistakes good or bad?” They would respond, “Good!” My response was, “When?” They would quickly answer, “When you learn from them!”

This became our ritual whenever one of the kids made decisions we wanted to talk about:

1. Clarify what happened using questions, not accusatory statements.
2. Clarify how the issue conflicted with our core values: the Four Rules.
3. Conclude with shaking it off, and moving forward with the commitment that we have learned from the process.

Today, Lauren is more than 30 years old and we have three grandchildren. The Four Rules became so ingrained that, on occasion, I’ve even received a text from one of the kids saying that they had told a friend about the Four Rules and the timeline.

Signature Healthcare and the Sacred Six

Fast forward 12 years; Signature Healthcare CEO/President Joe Steier commissioned a service value study sent to 18,000 employees to identify the values that make a great care-giver. From that study, the Sacred Six was introduced: Compassion, Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, Patience and Positivity.

At the time, I was serving as an HR consultant for Signature and had recently been assigned the task of onboarding a newly acquired region in Indiana. A few months after the acquisition, Signature conducted its routine nine-month employee engagement survey; the Indiana region came in last place out of 11 regions. Fortunately, the newly promoted regional vice president, Kimberly Vermilyea, knew that the way you achieve results is through employees. She understood that the further you get away from the customer, the less control you have over the customer experience. Like the Four Rules, we used the Sacred Six as a critical component for onboarding that region to adopt the Signature culture.

As a region, we took every opportunity to discuss the Sacred Six and gave examples of behaviors to look for. We set an expectation that leaders would learn to recognize employee actions that support Sacred Six values, and we would hold each other accountable for behaviors that conflicted with these values.

Seeing a Value in Action

Being able to see a behavior and then connect it to a value is not as intuitive as one would think. It took time for leadership to be able to see and understand how to connect an employee action into one or more of the Sacred Six, especially when the performance issue was not tangible. Routinely, a local CEO would call, asking how to handle a member of their leadership team who was meeting the technical aspects of their job, yet something was missing. They would use vague terms, such as the employee is “lazy,” has a “poor attitude,” or is not a “team-player.”

Just like the conversations with my kids, I’d start asking questions: “Why do you say that?” “Can you give me specific examples of things this individual does that would make you say they are lazy or has a poor attitude or is not a team-player?”

After a few minutes of letting them talk and ask questions, I’d say, “That is perfect information. Can you tell me which Sacred Six values those behaviors conflict with?” You could almost feel the relief come through the phone as they connected the definition of a value to the ability to see the value in action.

Hardwiring Values at a Divisional Level: See It in Each Other

Nine months later, during the next employee engagement cycle, the Indiana region went from last to 4th place out of 11 regions. The results caught the eye of the divisional leader, Mark Wortley, who asked me to assume responsibility for coordinating efforts with regional operational leaders to elevate the employee and customer experience.

Being yet another layer further from the customer, the challenge to embed values became more difficult because of two major factors:

1. At the division level, we had to work through regional leadership who had operational challenges; any cultural solution had to be simple and recognizable.
2. We noticed when a “rock star” CEO at the local level would leave, it wasn’t uncommon to have cultural setback — leading to more operational challenges — because the culture was built around the CEO’s personality and specific training.

To solve the problems, we introduced a simple research-based process: See it in Each Other. First, research came from our consummate teacher, CEO/President Joe Steier. Steier introduced senior leadership to an *American Behavior Scientist* study (Losada & Heaphy, 2004, p. 8) that identified ways to maintain high-performance teams. One of three specific things leaders can do to support high performance is to provide positive reinforcements significantly more often than they provide negative corrections (ideally at a ratio of 5.6 positive reinforcements for each one negative correction). The next study was a Cornell study (Hinklin & Schreisheim, 2004, p. 369) suggesting that positive reinforcement increases role clarity, effectiveness and satisfaction.

The concept of See it in Each Other is simple:

1. We kept reminding local leadership that, although their daily lives are filled with operational whirlwinds, many employees around them are doing little things that sustain quality service, exceptional customer experience and good team work.
2. We asked local leadership to spend three minutes during their morning daily huddle discussing things they saw that they’d like to see more of.
3. Then, throughout the next few days as members of the leadership team saw the employee, they would let them know that the

leadership team was talking about them; and they would thank them for their efforts.

These leaders were encouraged to keep it simple; they didn't need to recognize 10 or 15 people per day. If they would consistently recognize four to six people per day on different shifts, in different departments, then over the course of the month, the culture of recognition would take root and blossom.

This process helped overcome the two challenges identified above. First, the process was simple to explain, avoided complicated forms and tracking processes; and when a member of the regional leadership team attended a morning huddle, they would be able to observe whether they spent a few moments practicing the See it in Each Other technique. Next, as middle managers began to understand the power of recognition, they didn't need a "rock star" CEO to drive the culture. It provided more stability through top local leadership change.

Keep It Genuine and Avoid Vagueness

We didn't expect every member of the leadership team to provide a recognition every day; one or two per week was plenty. During a follow-up visit to see how one location was adopting See it in Each Other, I attended the morning huddle. When they were ready to wrap up, I asked, "Didn't have any recognition today?" One member of the leadership team said, "I'm not going to fake it."

We talked as a team to understand what she meant; at the conclusion, the team realized there is a difference between their styles and being genuine. They perceived that we were asking them to be extroverted and bubbly when that is not who they are. They were encouraged to be themselves, and to use their own words to have a genuine conversation with the employee. They didn't need to offer a dissertation — just a simple thank

you for the way the employee compassionately handled a customer during a difficult time, or the specific way the individual jumped in to help a peer.

Avoiding vagueness is the key to getting the specific desired behaviors. Telling someone they displayed great teamwork doesn't tell the employee what you like. Saying, “We had good team work today because everyone jumped in when we had the late admission. Although this was not Susan's patient, she started the paperwork, allowing Jill to greet the patient and begin the assessment.” This is a 15- to 20-second conversation, and now Susan and Jill both know exactly what teamwork looks like.

The Power of Recognition

Don't underestimate the power of recognition. Research at Baylor University (Tsang, 2006, p. 139) suggests that people who are grateful are more likely to act in a pro-social manner, with gratitude being defined as an emotional response toward other people and not to oneself. The research also suggests that people who are grateful are less likely to engage in destructive interpersonal behavior.

What does that mean to leaders? No matter what the demands we have on our schedules, take time every day to look around to see employees doing the little things you want to see more of; then tell them “thank you.” It's great to get a recognition on the bulletin board, but this can't match the genuine compliment from a supervisor or a peer.

♥ *Try it today. Say “thank you” to a person for something specific, and watch the expression on their face. Then, see if you don't get more of the same behavior in the future.*

Getting Results and Keeping Them

By no means is this a magic bullet; recognition and reinforcement of service values are one part of our divisional/organizational intention to achieve consistent customer and employee experience across different regions through different leaders with different personalities. However, where local CEOs adopted the process of recognition and reinforcement of values, along with a couple other simple processes, they could see a change in their employee culture in a matter of weeks. One facility saw such a dramatic reduction in the number of customer complaints, it affected the reputation in the community within a year. At the divisional level, on a CEO survey, our team went from last place of three divisions to first place in one year because we simplified and clarified divisional goals and expectations on a range of topics, including customer and employee experience.

The challenge is creating a sense of urgency for consistency. The process was so simple and took so little time each day that it was easy to forget, or to let it go “just for today” because of other priorities. If values are important, then invest time “all the time” to recognize and reinforce behavior that supports these values.

Finding the Balance

Organizations that want a consistent culture need to find the balance between teaching principles and establishing visible processes. Most people know that Chick-fil-A is a faith-based organization, yet do they build their customer experience by telling employees to practice the Golden Rule? No way! They implement a simple stimulus/response process. When the employee hears “thank you” from a customer, they respond with, “It is my pleasure.”

Chick-fil-A has training intended to build leadership knowledge around concepts that are important to them. They also build simple processes that are recognizable regardless of the location or the local leader.

So, Who Cares?

I started this piece by asking, “Compassion@Work. Who cares?” Then I have spent the whole chapter discussing anything but compassion; instead, I addressed structures that support organizational values — including compassion. As the deadline approached to complete this chapter, I found myself flying to Florida two days before Hurricane Irma made landfall to work with Signature HealthCare facilities’ evacuation, and then deal with the aftermath of this Category 4 storm. Compassion — one of Signature’s Sacred Six values — was evident in the way employees worked with customers around the clock during that very difficult and stressful time.

Was it lucky that the employees showed compassion, or was it the fact that one of Signature’s Sacred Six values is compassion? My opinion is that it takes both!

Why embed values, including compassion? At home, we want our children to learn to make decisions based on sound reasoning and critical thinking. The Four Rules gave our family common language to discuss decision-making. Signature introduced the Sacred Six after they had grown to 18,000 employees in approximately 120 locations, with new leaders continually joining the company. During this time of rapid growth, Joe Steier didn’t want to lose the values that made Signature a special place to work.

In 2004, I started working with Consolo Services Group when they had two employees. Today, it has almost 100 employees around the country, and most of that growth occurred in the past couple of years. Like

Signature, when Consolo was small, the organization had a family feel, and it was easy to stay connected. As they grew, President Greg Kite couldn't stay as connected to all the employees as he wished. He knew he had to do something to maintain the employee commitment that had enabled the company to grow. In 2016, Consolo rolled out their service values with an expectation that leaders look for and recognize behaviors that support their values. Recently, an employee said, "I'm grateful to work for such an amazing company with an outstanding boss!"

Families, large companies and small startups can all benefit from identifying values that are important to their culture, and by being intentional in embedding them. Compassion: I would hope everyone wants it at work. The question is, "What are leaders going to do to define it and maintain it?"

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David has nearly three decades in human resource leadership positions holding the SHRM-SCP, SPHR, as well as the PCC coaching designation from ICF.



In June 2020, he and his partners formed Tresane Transformations, where they work with organizations and leaders during times of change and growth. Often this is during a merger, acquisition, or rapid growth that comes with private equity investment or the launch of a new product or service. They also have a track record of supporting industries like healthcare, where an ever changing environment is a norm.

David, a published author, has been active in SHRM volunteer leadership positions.

He enjoys learning from diverse perspectives, the outdoors, photography, traveling, and therapy appointments with Dr. Green (Golf). Married to Karen for 39 years, they have four children and four grandchildren.

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