Corporate values can be crucial elements of a company’s ability to encourage ethical decision-making in its employees, or they can just be words on a page. The difference has less to do with how dynamic and comprehensive your trainings are and more to do with the neuroscience of memory.

We intentionally structured our 4th Annual Forum to emphasize experiences, group sharing, and social dialogue. With guidance from Chris Adkins—Executive Director of the Undergraduate Program at the College of William & Mary’s Mason School of Business and NDDCEL board member—we scrapped the usual format of speakers and presentations, opting instead for a somewhat unconventional tactic: storytelling. This choice augmented our discussion and led to the creation of our vignette-based deliverable. Our experience with our own event was a kind of beta test for a message that we’ve seen frequently in our research: storytelling is the superior way to teach.

There are two neuroscience-backed reasons to use story-telling over memorization in teaching your values. The first is that we make sense of new experiences through the lens of previous experiences, both our own episodes and the episodes of others. In other words, we tend to call upon what we’ve learned through personal experiences and stories than on rote knowledge. The second is that stories provide an evocative, sensory, and meaningful sense of a concept whereas words and paragraph descriptions often lack specificity and emotional impact. Moreover, concepts mean different things to different people, and thus can lead to miscommunication. Stories offer a richness that helps clarify concepts.

Adkins explains that we are wired to look for patterns when making sense of experiences, connecting the present situation to episodes we have had ourselves or observed in others. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio highlights that our past experiences are tagged with emotions, and such “marking” helps us process our current reality. If the present moment matches past episodes tagged with the emotion of fear, then we are likely to process the current experience through the lens of fear.

This phenomenon relates to the divide between two types of memory: semantic and...
Leverage the power of storytelling

There are bound to be legends and exemplars at your organization, stories that get told in break rooms and on elevator rides about people who have exemplified leadership, values, or integrity. Harness these stories, crafting them into teachable moments that reinforce your organization’s values, making your commitments more salient to your employees.

Use leaders’ experiences to communicate values

Have senior leaders talk about ethical dilemmas they have faced, but not in a way that eulogizes them. Instead, encourage these leaders to share their thought processes during the decision: why was the choice difficult, what were the feared consequences, and were they tempted to make a choice they knew would be wrong? By giving employees the process of making an ethical decision from the perspective of a leader, you create a cultural context in your organization where difficult issues are more easily discussed.

Promote stories at all levels

Reinforce the notion of storytelling as a highly effective method for engagement and reflection across the organization. Use stories to unite cultures around core values in mergers, across different functions of your organization, and among your employees at every level. As stories are shared, individuals are prompted to reflect on their own situation and look for connections across the organization.

Build an ability to make the complex simple through storytelling

Stories can capture the complexity of situations, and yet can provide a powerful and simple way to communicate what matters most. Foster in your leaders the habit of communicating important values through simple, concise episodes that clearly illustrate the core values of the organization.

Key Points

- Chris Adkins

Semantic memory is comprised of facts, general meanings, and concepts. Values, such as integrity and honesty, or codes of ethics, are ideas residing in semantic memory. Episodic memory captures our experiences, either those in which we were the main actor or those we have observed. The distinction is important to behavioral ethics because ethical dilemmas are often personal and emotional—when you’re making an ethical decision, you’re not going to your semantic memory, combing through values statements or learned codes. You’re pattern matching your current situation to past experiences.

Stories also offer a better chance at conveying your values properly. When he facilitates conversations with executives about their organizations, Adkins begins by asking them to think of a story about a person at their company who exemplifies the “organization at its best” (the company values) and then share the episode with their group. He calls this method the exemplar exercise, and he says that it is powerful because it asks not about a specific value, but about someone or some action that exemplifies a value. The group conversations have immediate energy, with people sharing and building on each others’ comments. Adkins notes, “The stories provide richer definitions of what the organizational values really mean and reveal how individuals see that value in action inside the organization.” By telling a story of an employee refusing to sell a product he suspected to be faulty and incurring a cost in order to ensure that the product was functional, you much more powerfully represent a company priority than if you just list “quality” on a sheet of core values. One C-suite executive of a multinational insurance corporation shared with us that his organization avoids even writing down their corporate values, opting instead to have keystone stories that illustrate each value.

No matter your company’s principles or values, consider employing this method of learning when training employees. As Adkins summarized, “Stories help us see if our values on paper are truly values in practice.” Whether done formally or informally, in new-employee orientation or over a coffee break, employing this strategy of experiential learning will help solidify the culture you’re trying to build in the employees that will ultimately live it.