The importance of defining University values: behaviour statements

Values are brief words or phrases and summarise a lot of meaning
One the of key features of useful organisational Value sets is that they are memorable. The many shades of thought and belief captured during the Values consultation and discussion process will have been clustered and consolidated to capture its essence in a few short statements or value headings. This is a very useful and necessary process. It is essential to capture the essence of shared belief or we would never reach the stage where we could easily communicate, or reinforce our Values.

However, on their own, Value statements or labels are unlikely to affect change. They are simply too high level and too abstract to be easily – or consistently – used to direct or inform policy or behaviour.

If the meaning of values is not clarified people will diverge in their interpretations
In the absence of further guidance people will naturally generate their own personal (or departmental) interpretation of the University Values. The simpler the statement/label the greater the number of possible interpretations there are likely to be. In the worst-case scenario organisational Values may be seen as so abstract they are not considered at all and indeed viewed as just another marketing tool, of no direct relevance to the individual or their daily working lives.

Making values meaningful and useful
To ensure that everyone understands what is meant by the University Values and to support their practical use in culture change it is necessary to provide an additional layer of interpretation. This needs to be something that is still easy to use but that provides enough clarity to ensure that behaviours and decisions can be aligned, measured and judged against it. Behaviour statements are a tried and tested mechanism for providing that clarity.

Behaviour Statements
A Behaviour Statement in this context is a sentence that captures a benchmark behaviour associated with a Value. It ideally describes a behaviour that is aspirational but realistic i.e. behaviours we believe we could achieve on our best days (while recognising that none of us are perfect!)

Statements can be generated at several levels.
The main level will that of the organisation. These statements will describe the way that those inside, and outside, of the University can expect it to live its values. These statements will guide organisational decision making and allow groups within the University to check the alignment of their local decisions and behaviours. Organisational level statements usually begin with the positive “We will ..."

It can also be very useful to develop statements to guide decisions and behaviours at an individual level. The more personally (or organisationally) relevant any statement is the greater chance it has of being a valuable guide and check.

Example of Behaviour Statements from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU)

Organisational Behaviours
GCU, like very many organisations, has adopted the value of Integrity and accordingly the behaviour statements relating to honesty and accountability are fairly standard. In line with its Mission ‘For the Common Good’ however the value of Integrity is also clarified as meaning that GCU ‘strives to make a positive difference in the world’. The GCU statements were generated from the initial ground up consultation process that resulted in the selection of the four GCU Values.
Individual level behaviours
These are statements that define the way that a group of people (e.g. all staff, all staff and students, managers, leaders etc.) agree they should live the University values. GCU has adopted 3 levels of individual statements. The first set outline behaviours that everyone within GCU aspires to live to (All staff and students). The second outlines behaviours that all People Managers within the University believe they should adopt and the third outlines behaviours that Strategic Leaders aspire to. There are many links between these levels and the organisational behaviours in recognition that one levels behaviours can affect that of another.

Table 1: illustration of the link between layers for an individual GCU behaviour statement under the Value of Integrity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrity Description</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We will strive to make a positive difference in the world</td>
<td>Organisational level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ensure that the University’s mission informs every strategic decision we take</td>
<td>Strategic Leader level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I engage with the University’s stakeholders in order to co-create solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I share and celebrate my team’s contributions to the Common Good</td>
<td>People Manager level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage and support team members in their efforts to deliver for the Common Good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that I can make a positive difference by what I do as a member of the GCU community</td>
<td>All staff and student level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The GCU individual behaviours were initially drafted and then refined in a year long period of iterative, and largely online, consultation with the staff groups concerned.

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1 The GCU approach to individual behaviours was modelled on the one used with great success by Guys & St Thomas’s Health Trust several years prior to our development. Thanks & acknowledgements to the GSTT OD group for their help & support.