

# Values deliver quality

Deep-seated values remain intact and serve to keep organisations on a steady course



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Almost every business leader has gone on record to state that his organisation's primary mission is to deliver quality and value. Henry Ford, Ray Kroc, Jack Welch and dozens more focussed their companies on the mantra 'quality delivers value'. But when reflecting on the future of our business leaders, and the MBA programmes many of them attend, I'd like to propose that 'values deliver quality'.

The number of business schools has increased dramatically in the past 20 years, and, being from the University of Chicago, I believe that a competitive field is a good thing, especially for MBA students and the corporations who seek to hire them. Today, business schools all strive to offer an outstanding programme of study to students, a network of support to alumni and ongoing intellectual engagement to faculty. Addressing the needs of these diverse stakeholders can lead to confusion, except for those schools that have a unified set of values embraced by the entire set of stakeholders.

I'd like to share some examples of how an organisation's values help achieve quality by defining a 'playing field' and identifying key factors in effectively implementing strategies. My reference point is a university-based business school that was founded at the end of the 19th century. Still, the concept of a values-based playing field is not limited to academic institutions. All organisations, in my experience, can benefit from operating within well-defined and widely-understood boundaries.

The University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, perhaps more than many other business schools, holds a set of values that closely mesh with those of the University of Chicago. These values define what initiatives are within the playing field and thus worth considering, as well as what initiatives remain outside and, therefore, are not worth pursuing.

The first value is a *deep respect for the individual*. This value derives from the very beginning of the university when it was stated that anyone who had the intellectual capability and drive to learn was welcome, regardless of religious belief, race, or gender. William Rainey Harper, founder of the university, believed that students who could not afford to attend full-time programmes on the main campus should be able to take classes part-time and still be taught by the same tenure-track faculty, be held

responsible for the same demanding workload, and receive full course credit. The fact that Chicago Booth now offers this, is a testament to this long-standing value.

A second value, which I term '*tough-mindedness*', relates to the way people work together. It embodies a number of dimensions – a focus on fundamentals rather than on fads, the courage to challenge orthodoxies, a seriousness of purpose, and respect for data rather than unsubstantiated opinions. The entire University of Chicago has a long tradition of rigorous, open inquiry and a seemingly unrelenting appetite for questioning. We somehow have this all-too-rare ability to separate the issue from the person, such that we can be hard on the issue being discussed without 'shooting the messenger'.

There is a third value that defines the playing field at this university, *dogged determination*. Right from the beginning, people never accepted 'no' for an answer but continued to pursue their vision of what could be.

These three values work together to produce powerful outcomes. For example, when Luis Miranda, president and CEO, IDFC Private Equity, was a student at Chicago Booth, we worked together to create the school's first, and only, compulsory course in leadership. Given the three values that I've described, I was confident in giving Luis and a small group of other students the responsibility for this initiative because I trusted and respected them. Luis describes his experience as, "The ability to be involved in that transformation is my most singular Chicago experience. It taught me that if there's a problem in life, don't complain about it, fix it."

Values not only define the playing field for an organisation, but they also attract people who find a particular set of values personally comfortable and even exciting. These values and those who live them day-to-day define any organisation's sustainable competitive advantage.

People come and go, but deep-seated values remain intact. They serve as a compass in keeping organisations, especially business schools, on a steady course. Values don't belong in a PowerPoint document hanging on a wall behind someone's desk. Instead, they need to be internalised by everyone throughout the organisation and lived moment-by-moment and day-to-day.

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