Everyone loses when the values of employees clash with those of the firm

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In academic circles "value incongruence" is defined as the difference between an individual's personal value hierarchy and the perceived value hierarchy of an organisation.

More simply, the term is used to describe instances where an employee's values are at odds with those of the organisation they work for, resulting in developing negative attitudes towards their role, their organisation and themselves.

The dangers of value incongruence

Value incongruence can occur as early as the initial recruitment process if applicants or employers do not take the opportunity to communicate their core values – perhaps incorrectly assuming that sharing such information is unimportant as it is not directly related to the job role.

It's also common for employees or employers to intentionally claim desired values to make a favourable impression. For example, a candidate may say they are deeply customer-focused when monetary rewards provide a greater motivation, or a company may boast a deep commitment to CSR, when in reality their activities extend as far as making donations rather than taking any personal action.

Employees can expend so much energy suppressing their own values or amplifying values they do not hold in an attempt to fit in that they fall prey to fatigue and risk burnout.

Value incongruence can also be a result of organisational change, particularly if the new way of doing business deviates from values the company previously held. If employees cannot fully accept the company's new focus they are more likely to feel dissatisfied and increasingly outcast from the organisation.

This raises many problems for organisations – not least the effect this has on productivity and performance.

Disengaged employees are less likely to participate in or support activities they perceive as falling beyond their job requirement, limiting their organisation's capability to innovate. Research has also shown that high levels of value incongruence has been associated with higher levels of employees intending to leave their organisations.

Through surveying employees at a multinational healthcare company in Asia my colleagues and I discovered that value incongruence is clearly linked to ego depletion of staff, and can impact upon performance – particularly in employees who are happiest in their roles, as any negative feeling has greater influence.

The most common method used by managers to encourage commitment to the cause is providing monetary incentives such as productivity targets and bonuses. This practice is based on the principles of positive reinforcement, and makes the assumption that desired behaviour – such as higher job performance – can be encouraged when a clear reward is offered.

However, whilst it's true these schemes can boost employee performance in the short-term, they do little to instil long-term commitment because they fail to foster enjoyment or interest in the job itself.

The essential element missing is a means of providing employees with the feeling that their contribution to the organisation is valued. So what can managers do to provoke greater engagement? Conversely, one answer lies in providing staff with greater levels of responsibility.

The effects of granting greater autonomy in the workplace

My research, based on data gathered over a four-year period from a labour force survey across Australia, indicates that emphasising employees' sense of agency is a far more effective means of motivating a workforce.

People's attitudes, and to some extent their personalities, are shaped by their experiences. The work environment in particular can have a long-term impact on an individual's personality. Employers should take time to become familiar with their employees' values and desires, and tailor the parameters of their job functions in a way that best satisfies both theirs and the company's interests.

Taking steps to enhance an employees' sense of control over time can boost their job satisfaction, and as a result their effectiveness. Additionally, as employees feel better connected to their organisations they become encouraged to contribute on a wider scale; implementing new ideas, improving procedures and identifying potential problems. In turn, this reinforces their sense of agency, creating a positive loop.

This is by no means a new approach, but it's one that's often overlooked as it is wrongly assumed that paying this level of attention to staff takes too much time and expense. However, by embedding an autonomous approach in employees' daily duties, employers can consistently reinforce those desired values and beliefs with little additional cost.

There are other positive outcomes, such as employees generally being healthier, happier and more satisfied in life. Greater autonomy can also build confidence to explore new ideas both in their personal and professional lives.

But there are risks. When employees lack the confidence or the capacity to master their work, bestowing greater autonomy can cause undue stress. Managers should pay particular attention to those yet to display the ability to use their judgement and take the initiative to make decisions and provide opportunities for training and skills development as a first step.

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Notes:

- *This post is based on the authors' paper Depletion from self-regulation: a resource-based account of the effect of value incongruence, co-authored with Hong Deng, Kwok Leung and Yan-Jun Guan, in Personnel*

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- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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