

Creating & Sustaining Operationalized Values as a Differentiator

As humans, our motivation, inspiration and actions tend to be driven by emotion and purpose more than logic and data. It's in every organization's best interest to understand that customers want to know what you believe in, and employees want to know what they are working for. Organizational values can illustrate that higher purpose, defining for customers how you operate while making an emotional connection with employees that inspires action.

In her book *Dare to Lead*, Brene Brown estimates only 10% of organizations her team has worked with have operationalized their values into teachable and observable behaviors used to train employees and hold them accountable. "If you're not going to take the time to translate values from ideals to behaviors – if you're not going to teach people the skills they need to show up in a way that's aligned with those values, and then create a culture in which you hold one another accountable for staying aligned with the values – it's better not to profess any values at all," she concludes.

Those are strong words and pack a punch for many businesses today. While taking the time to establish values and placing them prominently on your website is credible, it's not nearly enough. In order to become part of day-to-day operations, they need to become the shared roadmap and compass for how teams operate with clients, partners and each other.

"In addition to defining who you are, values can differentiate an organization," said Tim Murnane, president & CEO of Opus. "They set the tone for everything. Whether you are developing, designing and constructing buildings or selling ice cream, at the very core, leadership needs to step out, stand for something and say, 'this is how we do things, and it's important to us.'"



A Legacy of Enduring Values

In his early years at Opus, Tim Murnane worked closely with Mark Rauenhorst, son of Opus' founder Gerry Rauenhorst. "Gerry laid the foundation for our values way back in the 1950s. Mark continued the legacy as president and CEO, and in 2009 I stepped into the role. It's always been well-known that Opus was a value-driven organization, and I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with both remarkable men and to be leading the future of Opus."

After Murnane took the helm, one of his top priorities was to reinvigorate Opus' core values. "I arranged an offsite brainstorming session with my leadership team to clarify and articulate who we are and expectations for how we operate. We started from scratch and everyone contributed what they thought were our core values. Everyone in the room came up with 'respect' and 'integrity' as either the #1 or #2 value, and that goes back to the influences of Mark and Gerry."

When the official core values were announced, respect and integrity were of course included, as well as safety, stewardship, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Those six values, extending from the rich history and tradition of the company's founders, are rooted deep within the Opus organization, informing how associates work together and how they interact with clients and partners.

"Establishing values and living them defines companies that are generational and long lasting, versus here and gone," said Murnane. "Placing a stake in the sand and saying, 'this is who we are,' has been a key brand differentiator for Opus. The feedback we get from associates is that they appreciate being part of a company that places high priority on values, and our clients see the impact of our values in our work."

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Kim Noonan



Operationalizing Values

In today's connected world, the collective client experience delivered by a company is really the most powerful form of marketing and brand building. The same applies to values. They are not just words in a brochure or on a website, they need to be experienced. Operationalizing values and making them part of everyday business can be a powerful and impactful differentiator.

"Clients consistently tell us that Opus' project delivery model, product quality and track record of performance all definitely deliver significant value," said Kim Noonan, vice president of marketing & brand for Opus. "However, I believe two of our biggest differentiators are our people and our culture, as exemplified through our values and client experience. These integral components positively impact the outcome of every project for every client. And through my marketing and brand lens, it allows me to not just communicate 'Opus delivers great buildings' but instead 'Opus helps inspire, create and deliver meaningful spaces and communities where people achieve their goals and thrive'. That's a result of the unique combination of our people, values and culture. It's our secret sauce, if you will, and it's powerful, something that no other firm can exactly replicate."



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Kelli Justesen



The role of Noonan and her marketing, brand and innovation team is to understand what matters most and then support the business in delivering outstanding products and experiences that clients value. This includes strategies to communicate the values as part of the brand internally and externally. It also includes continually listening to clients and partners at multiple points along their journey with Opus. A strategic insights gathering process reinforces what’s working and helps to identify opportunities where Opus can bring even more value.

Delivering that value is a direct result of an internal culture of talented Opus associates who do the work. In pursuit of its client-centered mission – *Driven to exceed your expectations and empower your mission through the buildings we deliver* – Opus helps associates embrace the company values first by leadership example, then by reinforcing the values through consistent communication across multiple channels, visual reminders and ongoing recognition of associates who exemplify the values. Over time, values become engrained and serve as a point of alignment and unity, ultimately leading to both accountability and pride.

“People are what make up an organization,” said Kelli Justesen, vice president of human resources for Opus. “Their behaviors and the organization’s culture need to support the values espoused. Otherwise values are just something that sit on a wall in a frame. You need to walk the talk.”

Opus supports walking that talk through various programs, policies and events. For example, stewardship opportunities permeate the organization – associates can participate in United Way Week in the fall and Founder’s Day in the spring. Associates also receive two days of paid time off every year to volunteer doing whatever is important to them, whether that’s spending a day at the Humane Society or reading to children at a school.

The Innovation Team is another example. Formed five years ago, it is made up of cross-functional associates committed to driving innovation and doing things better. These associates act as champions for innovation and continuous improvement, which has been embraced throughout the organization.

The bottom line? When defined and operationalized properly, organizational values illustrate the higher purpose of the organization. They define how you operate and create an emotional connection that inspires employees to action, improving performance, engagement, retention and recruitment.

“Our goal is always to operate within our values and not in juxtaposition to them,” said Justesen. “And we certainly want to hear about it if we aren’t. So we have processes, like our engagement survey, and many other mechanisms that provide a means for associates to be heard and provide feedback.”

The steps Opus has taken to operationalize the company’s values are felt by associates in every office across the country. Values are “engrained in the fabric of the organization,” according to Noonan. “We live them by building them into our daily work. In addition to being the right thing do to, it helps engage and inspire our associates, which I believe results in a better-quality project for our clients and partners.”

“Living these values is hard work. And in all honesty, it’s not always nirvana at Opus,” said Murnane. “It’s not as if everyone is running around giving high-fives with everything clicking along perfectly every day. As with any family, there are times when things don’t work. But that’s how we learn and improve. I believe in trusting first – giving people a lot of responsibility with the right support, and then trusting they’ll do it the right way. They almost always rise to the occasion, and by embracing our values, their actions translate into exceptional projects and experiences for our clients and partners.”



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