The First Time We Tried to Define Our Company's Core Values, It Failed. Here's What We Did Differently the Second Time.

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Two years of upheaval has changed my company, Lattice, at its core. During the most difficult times over the past two years, I've found immense strength in Lattice's values. They echo what's most important to us as a team. When I was tired, stressed or lonely, our values motivated me to get back up and continue pushing. They kept me going through the worst of times, and they kept me going as we returned to rebuilding and growth.

Looking back, I'm grateful I had those guiding values as my rock. They're grounding, inspiring and motivational — but they weren't easy to create.

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Our first attempt at values failed miserably

In 2018, we took the entire 30-person team to Mexico for an off-site event. We'd had a hectic year, and our plan was to enjoy a long weekend on the beach, swimming in the ocean and enjoying meals together. The one work activity we had planned

was an exercise to define our company values.

We sat in a circle on the beach and shared the qualities we most valued in our coworkers. The exercise was unexpectedly emotional. One laconic engineer stood up and explained how determination and perseverance defined his life. Others spoke about how honesty underpinned trust and friendship. One of our first marketers gave an impassioned speech on creativity. We laughed and cried and shared things we would never have in the office.

Through this process, we created a list of values that we believed defined us.

Except they didn't.

It's like we were painting a picture. We handed out brushes and let everyone loose on the same canvas. Instead of a beautiful painting, we ended up with all of the colors swirled together in a mush.

The "mush" values we came up with – empathy, effort, growth – didn't describe us; they described basically *every company ever*. They were empty platitudes that, when we returned to San Francisco, I don't remember a single person *actually* using.

I felt certain that we had nailed our values in Mexico. The tumbleweeds rolling across our office highlighted how wrong I was.

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Great values reinforce what's already there

Great fiction writers identify real-life truths and bring them into their books and poems. Reading their words, you end up

thinking, *That's something I've experienced, but I've never been able to put my finger on it before*.

Values are similar. They shouldn't dictate or drive new behavior. They need to describe what's *already* happening in your organization.

For our second run at Lattice's values, our COO, J Zac Stein, ran a process with a far smaller group – primarily just himself, me and my co-founder, Eric Koslow. We took a bunch of common phrases that our colleagues *already* used and stuck them all around the room. We looked for the phrases that highlighted what was special about our team.

"Ship, Shipmate, Self" was one. We always spoke about how the success of our company is more important than the individual, and how the wellbeing of our colleagues is more important than our own. That became our first value.

"Chop Wood, Carry Water" was another. We'd say it whenever we had to do something tough, but necessary. We surrender to the outcome and work even when no one is watching. That became our second value.

"Clear Eyes" – approaching everything with honesty and clarity – became our third. "What's next?" – an obsession to grow, improve and move forward – rounded out the quartet.

The difference between honesty and Clear Eyes might seem slight, but it's important. The former *points* towards the quality we admire. The latter *is* the thing itself: the quality and action we truly, deeply cared about.

In Mexico, we focused far more on the former. We told ourselves that we would be empathic and effortful. But back in the office, those were just words. How does an engineer exhibit empathy when writing code? How does a designer embody effort when creating sales enablement assets?

Our new values were memorable and real and tied to specific behaviors. When someone at Lattice faced a decision to better themselves or bolster the company, our values guided their decision-making.

They spread like wildfire.

Even today, years later, our values remain a cultural cornerstone. They help people focus on Monday morning as well as push through complex problems. They inspire us to do selfless acts and tackle the unseen work. And they motivate us to push through crises and build a better future.

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Be inflexible about your values

When times get tough, you can't compromise on your values or mission. But everything else is fair game.

To understand why, consider the inverse: someone who is dogmatic and uncompromising in their day-to-day work, but pliable on their fundamental values and mission. How effective do you think that person would be?

Even when it's stuff that seems important — the way we build products, the goals we set, our hiring practices and so on — we need to be willing to let it all go, especially the smaller things that stopped serving us years ago.

I think this mentality is equally important on a personal level. What will you work towards, no matter what? How will you treat people, no matter what? What do you know you will value, no matter what? And then how will you make sure you stay adaptable and childlike in your willingness to learn and change, so you can meet the world wherever it's at?

It's our values that dictate the answers to those questions.

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