What Matters Most, and who Decides?
By Joe Gerstandt

Maybe you have had an experience similar to this…
A number of years ago I went to work for an organization that in the interviewing, hiring, and on-boarding process was very focused on, and proud of, its core values. And they were good values. The attention paid to them as I joined the organization made me even more excited about joining the organization.

Once I got beyond the on-boarding process those values never made another appearance. They were not mentioned or referred to, and they did not drive behaviors and decisions on a regular basis. Not only that, but there were common behaviors and practices that actually ran counter to the espoused values, and some of these behaviors were even formally rewarded. This was also an organization where different divisions were actually encouraged to compete with each other which led to lots of interesting and loud and profane conversations. Inside the organization, *how* you played the game mattered very, very little.

What matters most in your organization? What are the things that actually inform behavior and choices?

In my experience there tends to be a lot of unwritten rules about what actually matters. Unwritten rules are typically not anchored in the espoused values of the organization, they are not anchored in the explicit policy or the performance standards and can often run counter to that stuff.
A couple of really common examples that I see of this…

Lots of organizations speak to the importance of "straight-talk," telling the truth to each other, speaking up, etc. Yet I consistently find in those organizations that lots of employees know better, and frequently keep ideas, information and questions to themselves because of the real and/or perceived risks.

If it is not your stated values and principles that really matter, what does?

And who decides? And what are those decisions based on? Whether people on the payroll are willing to tell the truth to each other or not seems to me like a pretty big deal. If employees cannot do this, I have a hard time seeing how your culture is not a net liability.

More and more organizations have values, principles, and visions that speak very eloquently to the importance of diversity and inclusion. And many of those organizations make very little in the way of actual investment into diversity and inclusion. Diversity and inclusion show up explicitly as part of what the company claims to be about, and yet leaders are still uncertain as to the "business case," and can't pay it any attention.

If what we say is important is *not* what is actually important…what does that say about us?

The gap between who you claim to be and who you actually are is a breeding ground for pathology and dysfunction.

What matters most where you work?