

Distinctive DNA.

The ties that bind

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.

Who are you?

Values are the foundation of how an organisation's distinctive. They're about culture and personality. They represent the actions and decisions people take instinctively. They define how people treat each other as colleagues and how they treat clients. They're the most truthful indicator of what an organisation's really like.

Having worked for and with professional firms for almost 15 years, it seems clear to me that it's an area of business most firms get wrong. Worse, it's often an area of business they don't take seriously.

They may talk a good game, preaching the importance of values, behaviours and culture in the about us section on their website and recruitment pages; they may talk in their pitches about how *"our values define who we are and the way we work"* or *"our distinctive culture is rooted in our values, which we live and breathe every day"*.

The reality, however, is somewhat different.

Shout to the top.

You can't tell someone what values they have; they either have them or they don't. You can't tell someone to be innovative, collaborative or creative if, by their very nature, they aren't.

This is the first thing firms get wrong. They generally take a top down approach; a small group of partners decide what values they think matter and then tell people what the firm's values are. The outcome of this approach is that people feel they're having values imposed on them.

To build a consistent and distinctive culture, you have to take a bottom up approach. You have to engage your people in the process. Only they can tell you what it feels like to work for you, who can describe the personality and behaviours they see and feel around them every day.

Second, for values to have any purpose and context, they need to link directly to a firm's brand proposition. Yes, values should act as a guide so people know what's expected of them, but people also need to know why those things are expected of them.

Few professional firms do this, but then few professional firms have a clearly defined brand proposition.

Compounding these problems most firms' values are, at best, a bit uninspiring. Of which more below...

Knowing me knowing you.

Look at the top five values across law firms and accountancy firms (in descending order below) and a number of problems emerge.

Law	Accountancy
Teamwork	Integrity
Integrity	Respect
Respect	Excellence
Excellence	Trust
Commitment	Approachable

First, everyone's saying the same thing. Law firms are saying the same thing as other law firms. Accountants are saying the same thing as other accountants. Often, the law firms are saying the same thing as the accountants and the accountants are saying the same thing as the law firms.

Second, shouldn't most of these values be redundant? Would you want to work with a lawyer - either as a colleague or client - who didn't have integrity or commitment? Would you appoint an accountant who didn't treat you with respect or who wasn't trustworthy?

Surely you wouldn't (or shouldn't) recruit people who aren't professional and committed or who lack integrity, trust and respect. Would you?

With values like these, firms are simply highlighting the 90% of their business that's the same as their peers rather than emphasising the 10% that makes them distinctive. All they're doing is telling clients, prospects and potential employees that they're all exactly the same.

Why would you want to do that?

A better future.

Values matter because people and relationships matter. Clients and prospects are presented with lots of technically able lawyers and accountants who take their jobs seriously and work hard, but they choose to work with advisers who have something else on top.

Firms need to work out what that something else is that characterises their culture and approach. To do this they need to spend more time finding out from their clients what it's like to work with them and more time finding out from their people what it's like to work for them.

To be really successful, firms then need to build values into all of their internal processes - recruitment, appraisals, reward and promotion. Championing their values should form the cornerstone of the people they recruit, who they promote and how they reward people.

Firms need to demonstrate, overtly, that the people who champion their values are the people that will be successful within the business - and the people that don't champion their values won't succeed.

My favourite game.

Here's a handy game for finding out how relevant and authentic your firm's values are (it's a good one to play with your management team):

1. Imagine you've recently won a new client and you start working with them tomorrow. Can you write down four tangible, practical things you'll do for them that demonstrate each of your values?
2. Then imagine you have a new employee starting tomorrow. What four things will your firm do for them that demonstrate each of your values?
3. Now, can you think of four things your firm's done in the past that you can show to a prospect as examples and evidence to support each of your values?
4. Last, ask a selection of people on your floor what the firm's values are and what they mean. Do they get it right?

If you can't do each of these things, then your firm doesn't have the values it claims. Back to square one...

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