



## Article

# In Search of Organisational Values: a collaborative action research study to find values to underpin the organisational vision and mission

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A large mosaic artwork on a light-colored tiled floor. The mosaic depicts a globe with various colors: blue for the oceans, green for the continents, and white for the clouds. The globe is surrounded by numerous broken pieces of white ceramic dishes, including plates, bowls, and cups, which are scattered around the globe. The overall composition suggests a theme of global unity and the fragility of human-made structures.

# Humanistic Management: an alternative way of organising

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Cover image: A Gaudi mosaic: photo by Christina Schwabenland

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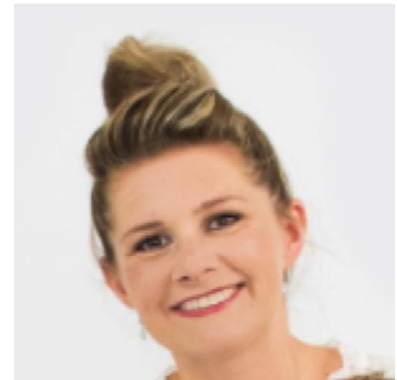
David McAra

# *In search of organisational values: a collaborative action research study to find values to underpin the organisational vision and mission*

**Ruth Slater and Jayne Mizon**



*This is an example of practitioner-led research using humanistic management practices in a manufacturer of microwaveable snack foods. The aim was to uncover the extent to which employees found the company's vision and mission meaningful and to find*



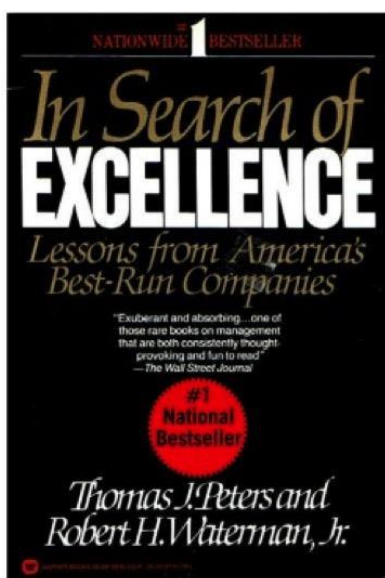
*values which would support the mission and vision. Four values appeared (Family, Ambition, Responsibility, Excellence), to which employees had contributed, and the organisation accepted the new practices which valued employee contributions and extended them to other parts of the group.*

## **Keywords**

vision, mission, values, collaboration, humanistic practices, practitioner-led research

## **Introduction**

Readers may recognise the slightly sarcastic turn to the title of the widely read and much-vaunted book by Peters and Waterman of the 1980s, *In Search of Excellence*.



Influential in its day, and still cited by students, the text suggests, by example, a prescription to create excellent (profitable) organisations. The way was through culture and values. However, we ask, how often does the rhetoric of organisational values seem wide of the mark when it comes to the experienced reality of employees? So, in this paper, we report on the process and outcomes of an action research project whose overall aim was to discover organisational values which would support a company's vision and mission and create cohesion and impetus behind them before the company imposed them, using an approach which we call humanistic. Furthermore, we acknowledge the place of values in organisational cultures but question the widely acknowledged, but un-interrogated, link between vision and mission statements and value statements (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Barney 1986).

We believe that the project is significant because it is a rare example of a practitioner, in this case, a human resources (HR) practitioner, using collaborative action research (AR) to identify values from among employees. This humanistic approach to finding organisational values contrasts with the more conventional approach often taken, which is typically the practice of devising and imposing values, often designed by the leadership or third-party proxies. We hold, therefore, that this paper and the story, which unfolds, will be of interest to organisational leaders, HR, or HRD/OD practitioners who are dissatisfied with the outcomes of conventional approaches to articulating values, and who could see the potential for AR within their own organisation.

The research sought first to find two phenomena. First, the extent to which employees, within their day-to-day experience, understood the organisation's agreed vision and mission statements; second, with that knowledge, to find out which values employees thought would support those statements. Additionally, following the Human Resource Development (HRD) tradition of individual employee betterment (see McGuire 2011), other benefits accrued through these collaborative processes, which gave the employees a platform to communicate and collaborate in the search for meaningful company values. In this way, employees became stakeholders in the values formation process (Reason and Bradbury 2006:2, Mills and Spencer 2005:26), and so became active participants in their own and the company's development.

### **The context for the study**

Jayne, the HR practitioner, conducted this research in her organisation, Rustlers, - a manufacturing site of a family-owned Irish food group, Kepak Convenience Foods (<https://www.kepak.com/about/>). The factory makes Rustlers (<https://rustlersonline.com/about-us/>), a microwavable snack. The company began in the early 1980s and grew from being a sole trader to a group owning nine sites across three separate divisions, supplying food products to the UK, Ireland and Europe. This research site is in the UK and had 450 employees when Jayne conducted the research. Three-quarters of employees were working in manual non-skilled jobs, and a majority were Eastern Europeans. The remaining employees were British nationals in skilled or professional roles.

Family members of the original founder are still active in roles across the group, but a new leader commissioned a third-party to produce vision and mission statements for the company with the intention of producing a statement of values to underpin them. At this point, Jayne intervened and proposed that she should undertake an internal project to communicate these and facilitate the creation of value statements congruent with them.

### **Mobilising employees through values**

Although there is strong support in the literature for articulating organisational values, their association with vision, mission and culture, and the benefits they accrue collectively (Deal and Kennedy 1982, 2000; Barney 1986; Schein 2010), this is uninterrogated. The desired benefits rarely happen. Employers expect employees to demonstrate values in daily routines, it is the embodiment of values in behaviours and outcomes which makes employees the human resource valuable and unique, and a contribution to the attainment of organisational goals, and longer-term success (Denison 1990: 2; Gordon and Di Tomaso 1992: 2).

Writing in 1992, when humanistic approaches to management were appearing, Aktouf (1992: 411: 2) welcomed the shift of focus from the employee as “passive cog” to “active and willing accomplice” but warned of two opposite outcomes. These were what he called “the height of liberation” or “the pit of alienation and exploitation”. Critical management scholars (Ray 1986; Wilmott 1993; Sambrook 2004) see this trend as tending toward the latter position, with practices which are performative, lacking in emancipation, and devoid of development. Githens (2015: 191) has also seen that humanistic perspectives have side-lined discussions of power or other socio-structural issues. Githens conceded, however, that critical action research was appropriate to uncover these issues, but we think it takes a knowing practitioner to champion the process. Jayne was that knowing practitioner, and the effect of her intervention was to turn earlier practice on its head, facilitate discussions of organisational power and so prevent the articulation and communication of values by imposition.

### Collaborative Action Research – making connections

In an organisational context, AR is a way of finding things out from among a group of organisational members to address problems (Simpson and Bourner 2007: 178). In this case, the problem at hand was to uncover meaningful organisational values without their imposition from above. A key tenet of AR is the “participatory worldview” (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 6), acknowledging that participants co-create knowledge through inquiry in situated contexts. So, the underpinning condition for this research was that it would be “research with people” and not “research on people” (Heron and Reason 2006:1).

Fig 1: Cycles of Collaborative Research



Scholars identify four key components of AR: plan, act, observe and reflect (e.g. Lewin 1946; Reason and Bradbury 2006:14) with inquiry cycles moving between reflection and action. The first task was to determine how employees received the vision and mission, and the second, to find how these matched their experience of organisational life. The aim of the third task was to reveal values that were already part of the culture that could be relevant to the new vision and mission statements (Powell and Single 1996:499, Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:174 – 175).

There were three inquiry cycles, with three tasks for employees to carry out. The first task was to determine how employees received the vision and mission, and the second, to find how these matched their experience of organisational life. The aim of the third task was to reveal values that were already part of the culture that could be relevant to the new vision and mission statements (Powell and Single 1996:499, Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:174 – 175). The research, therefore, moved from a broad discussion of experience in inquiry cycle one to a narrower focus in inquiry cycle three, and processes enabled embedded and shared experiences to emerge and facilitate consensus about the perceptions employees had about working for the company, about what they valued and about what needed to be improved.

Jayne chose focus groups as the mechanism to deliver the inquiry cycles and she invited both factory and office staff to take part. There were in total five focus groups from each operational area and from headquarters, each with between six and nine employees, representing ten per cent of the company. Jayne made a personal approach to employees, saying that this was an opportunity (Coghlan 2001: 53) to share views and contribute towards the creation of the company's values to support the future direction and success of the organisation. Recognising that everyone had a considerable stake in the endeavour, Jayne assured them of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity and respect, and she did not publicise any information about the research before, during or afterwards. She also considered that the employees were novices in the process, without explicit knowledge or understanding of the terms "culture" and "values" (Denison 1990:2). Therefore, she used plain language, so that all employees could understand the process and take part.

Conversation and interaction between participants are fundamental to focus group effectiveness (Reason and Bradbury 2006) and because many of the employees were Eastern Europeans, with English as a second language, Jayne formed facilitated groups according to the main language in use in each group, so that employees enjoyed a common experience within a familiar social setting.

## **Inquiry Cycle One**

Jayne designed this cycle to unlock the basic assumptions, values and attitudes that already existed within the organisation (Schein 2010: 2). In this cycle, Jayne invited employees to share their feelings of what was good and bad about working for the company, frustrations and difficulties and aspects which the company could improve.

# Inquiry Cycle 1

To identify the underlying beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and values that make up the company culture

## ↳ The Good

- What do you like about working for the company?
- What are the characteristics of the company that you like?
- What do you think the company is good at as an employer?

## ↳ The Bad

- What do you dislike about working for the company?
- What frustrates you at work?
- What can the company do better as an employer?



The themes appearing from this inquiry cycle were phrases such as **strong teamwork** and that employees felt **part of a family**, which contrasted with simply being an employee of the organisation. One such quotation is emblematic of this sentiment:

*“...it’s like a big family, we are in it together”.*

Employees also highlighted **investment** and **innovation** (in the factory), **support** and **pay and benefits** as other positive aspects of the organisation.

As expected, there were some differences between the employees from the factory and those based in the offices. Factory employees, many of whom were of non-UK origin, tended to highlight **stability** as a positive aspect of the company. In contrast, employees working in the offices, highlighted **autonomy**, **trust**, and **openness** as positive characteristics of the company, expressing sentiments showing the potential for and appreciation of role-level decision-making.

## Initial emerging themes

Several common themes did appear, which concerned a need for development or improvement. All groups agreed that **communication** needed improvement, as did the **feedback** given by line managers to employees. Furthermore, all groups felt that there was a **lack of training and development opportunities**. This was not a surprise to Jayne, but it was a disappointing outcome for the company; senior managers would argue that they had already implemented several programmes for improving training and communication.



Comments to illustrate this included:

*“...we need more business updates [...] positive news is communicated but never the negative.”*

*“...the communication is terrible...it's a 'need to know' basis”.*

Factory employees highlighted their issues with the quality of product components:

*“...quality is not as good as it was last year... why are you using cheaper materials for our product?”*

Office employees highlighted a **lack of customer focus** for a branded product and a **lack of collaboration across different departments** as something needing improvement. These employees felt that the innovation taking place concerned improving the manufacturing operation, and not the brand and product.

Finally, throughout inquiry cycle one, all employees felt that there was an **inconsistency of practice** across all departments, with line managers making different decisions on the same or similar issues and in company routines. This turned out to be an important theme for the other research cycles to determine the values at the end of the research.

## Inquiry Cycle Two

This cycle focused more narrowly on the business vision and how clear this was to employees. Employees within each group formed two sub-groups to reflect on and discuss the espoused company vision statements.

**Inquiry Cycle 2**

*To identify whether the vision statements resonated with the employee body*

- ◆ We will be the market leaders in micro snacking by best understanding our customers and consumers.
- ◆ We will continuously innovate to meet the changing needs of our customers and consumers.
- ◆ We will have an ongoing commitment to the training and development of our people.
- ◆ We will have an unwavering focus on the continuous delivery of quality in everything we do.
- ◆ We will profitably expand our position in our chosen UK and European markets.

*How evident are these statements to you as an employee?*

**RUSTLERS**  
WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE

Jayne invited employees to place the vision statements in order of how clear each vision statement was within the company at the time of the research. Employees justified the order they had applied to the vision statements. In this way, knowledge appeared about the extent to which employees found and practised the company's espoused vision and mission. If the vision statements were clear in daily company routines, then they could represent a foundation for the values. If, however, employees felt that the espoused vision was

not clear, then this showed a gap in understanding and practice, with limited scope to achieve the purpose of supporting company goals.

### Office employees' views

Office employees were consistent in their feelings indicating that the most important vision statements were: profitably expanding the business position in the UK and Europe and having an unwavering focus on the continuous delivery of quality and market leadership in the microwaveable snackfoods category. These vision statements were associated with consistency in communication, which employees had already found as being poor in other respects.

Office employees felt that investment in training and development and innovating to meet the needs of customers and consumers as the least clear in the business. This reinforced the findings from inquiry cycle one, where training and development and the lack of focus on customers were both already highlighted as areas for development. Comments included:

*"...we have to innovate to meet the needs of our customers more frequently or we will lose them"*

*"...it can't be training and development as none of that is going on"*

### Factory employees' views

Factory employees, however, were ambivalent about the evidence for the vision, which illustrates the difficulty of imposing values from above and expecting understanding and compliance; there are competing interests. They appeared unaware of the purpose of the brand and the business ambition for the future. These findings suggest that despite the vision and mission, factory employees did not recognise the link between what they did and the vision and mission.

### Inquiry Cycle Three



This last cycle was one of both action and reflection (Heron and Reason 2006:6), and asked employees to consider, reflect on and evaluate a range of values, and whether they applied to the organisation. These were values known to Senior Management Team, but which they had not shared throughout the company or used before.

Jayne invited two subgroups from each focus group to choose two values from the list which they felt most accurately described the company at that time and to justify their choice. The two groups then selected two values from the list that they felt were least like the organisation. Again, Jayne asked the employees to explain the reasons for their choice.

One value had a meaning among all employees, as it arose in every focus group. This value was **teamwork**, as indicated by these examples of employee voices:

*“...we are all one team, everyone feels this”*

*“...we couldn't grow without teamwork, we need to keep this”.*

This was consistent with earlier inquiry cycles and went forward as a value.

Factory employees agreed that **quality** held little meaning to them, as messages about **quality** had seemed contradictory at times. They accepted that product quality was important in achieving company goals and expected company routines to reinforce product quality. In earlier cycles, these employees had indicated that they were not satisfied with the attention given to product quality. This is illustrative of the facility of the AR process to enable hitherto unheard voices. One observation reflected this:

*“...this is a consistent message...without a quality product, quality brand and quality people we would not have a business”.*

Employees wanted a heightened attention to **quality**, as it underpinned both the brand and the business strategy.

Employees in all factory focus groups cited **passion** and **enthusiasm** as the least evident values. Comments reflecting this include:

*“...how can we get excited about packing a burger?”*

*“...the only thing we are enthusiastic for is Friday”.*

The value selected by the all focus groups as being least evident was collaboration, and the most evident was teamwork. At first, this may not seem to be consistent with earlier suggestions that teamwork was evident in the culture when considered in the context of earlier views. However, it did appear that employees felt that although individual teams worked well together, such teamwork did not translate when the organisation expected teams to work cross-functionally. These views explained findings from inquiry cycle one that a lack of communication and consistency were frustrated employees.

## Values emerging

At the end of these three inquiry cycles, four core values emerged, which Jayne then proposed to senior management. These were: **Family**, **Ambition**, **Responsibility** and **Excellence**. There is little merit in values which do not support the business. There is little merit in values that do not reflect employees' experience of the company. To have either sort would be an opportunity missed for promoting cohesion, change, and development and unifying values, beliefs and routines across all areas of the business to support the mission and vision (Deal and Kennedy 2000: 138, Schein 2010:270).

Employees appeared to value support, teamwork and a sense of belonging, and so **Family** was a value that appeared both meaningful to employees and key in supporting the mission and vision; it also reflected the family-owned heritage of the company.

The vision and mission statements were explicit about the ambitious plans for the brand, growth and development of people, but employees felt that the company did not live up to those intentions (Kopaneva and Sias 2015: 359). However, employees supported **Ambition** to achieve the innovation, growth and brand dominance desired from the vision and mission.

Employees talked about **Quality** throughout the research and appeared to suggest that it was primarily associated with product quality. For the value to apply to the whole organisation, and not just in manufacturing, Jayne proposed the value **Excellence**, which could carry multiple meanings and enable consistency between values and practice (Graber and Kilpatrick 2008). **Excellence** also encompassed positive themes such as the stability that employees valued, and processes such as reward mechanisms and performance management.

The final value was more difficult to determine. If the company were to engage employees consistently across the business, then at least one value had to promote change. Jayne proposed **Responsibility** as a value implying underlying behaviours to bring about the change which employees thought were important. **Responsibility** was a value to empower and unite the whole company in taking responsibility for achieving the vision and mission and to eliminate existing undesirable characteristics.

## Conclusions

Here we highlight significant aspects of the research and explain what happened next. Jayne was able to propose values which were relevant to the vision and mission and was also able to use the findings from the inquiry cycles to suggest areas for company-wide development, to strengthen the modelling of the values by the leadership and senior team, improved communication and continuing participation.

The senior management agreed to extend the AR processes to other group sites and the new practices have created excitement and a desire to see their extension and development. This illustrates the potential to move beyond quick-fix interventions in organisational development which can be common (Greenwood and Levin 1998: 18). Therefore, this humanistic management approach has changed this company's practice and given voice to a greater number of employees than previously. It has lent weight to the argument for more interventions which value the human, facilitate individual growth and a sense of belongingness in which the individual will mobilise generously their skill and effort (Aktouf 1992: 411).

Readers of a critical persuasion may still see the perpetuation of the coercive nature of values (Willmott 1993: 526) in the building of organisations (Ray 1986), and the exploitation of the employees' goodwill and effort in practices shown here. Neither did the process address issues of power in contemporary organisations as Githens (2015: 191) had said. But, a "guerrilla" aim of the research had been to promote more emancipation through humanistic management approaches to practice, and management practices purporting to be humanistic should be interrogated more critically and we agree that a "modicum of realism is far better, and ethically superior, for both sides" (McGuire et al 2005: 135). However, the best place to interrogate such practices is in the modern organisation that is inevitably bound by economic priorities, by practitioners who care about employees for what they are and what they could be.

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Jayne is a Senior HR Manager at Rustlers, part of Kepak Convenience Foods, a branded FMCG business. In addition to her chartered membership of the CIPD, Jayne holds an MA from the University of Central Lancashire. Jayne undertook this study as part of her master's degree and Jayne regards the outcomes of this collaboration with employees on values the highlight of her career.

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Ruth Slater is also a Chartered Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and holds a PhD from the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University. She is a seasoned HR professional and has worked in several organisations in HRM prior to working in HE. Ruth is particularly interested in helping practitioner-researchers use participatory and collaborative methods of research in their own organisations

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