CORE VALUES have become so integral to the business lexicon that their existence is almost taken for granted. Go to the website of just about any small or midsize business, and you will likely find a page dedicated to core values.

It is precisely because they are so common, however, that business leaders must be especially diligent to keep them from becoming stagnant. What can CEOs and executive teams do to reinforce these fundamental principles and continually align their organizations around them?

*The CEO Advantage Journal* asked this question to three CEOs of midsize organizations. These leaders have helped their organizations grow despite a tough economy, and they credit much of their success to the focused alignment that their core values provide. Their ideas and experiences should be of value to other executives looking for ways to keep their core values truly core.
Keeping Core Values Alive

Why is it so important to clearly articulate your core values?

They align our organization. In 2000, we were only a small group of individuals struggling to establish some consistent growth. We went on a hiring binge looking for individuals that we thought could help grow the company. Over time, we found that we were dealing more with personnel issues than business issues. So the challenge was to find the right kind of people. That’s when we first developed our core values. We needed something to help us identify individuals who were in alignment with who we are. Initially, our values were a hiring tool, but they have morphed into something so much more.

We look at core values like a song. They mean something different to each individual, but all within the range of the song.

What are some ways that you reinforce your core values within your organization?

They’re proudly posted when you walk in. They’re on our website, our mouse pads, our coffee mugs. People understand how important they are when they see them all over the workplace. We reward people based on core values. Our “employee of the month” is given to someone who uniquely demonstrated one of our six core values. We have a quarterly “grinder award,” which goes to someone who has displayed the core value of persistence throughout that quarter. In addition, we publish weekly “core values stories” where employees recognize something they have seen in a coworker. We get good participation on that from throughout the company.

What else have you done to keep core values alive?

Based on our own experience, we have developed a screening process that determines how well a potential hire identifies with your core values. In addition to helping us attract the right individuals, we also teach this process to our clients.

About Resource

For over 35 years, Resource has focused on becoming a global leader in providing recruiting and learning solutions across a wide range of industries. Today, Resource has more than 550 consultants and 100 clients nationwide. Headquartered in Troy, Michigan, Resource has satellite offices in Dallas, Texas, and Weston, Florida.

Resource’s Core Values

- **People People**
  - Maintaining a relationship based on a personal need to help and serve others.

- **Details, Details, Details**
  - Providing a safe environment to uncover what matters most to those you serve—attention to the details that truly matter are imperative to your success.

- **Positive Enthusiasm**
  - You attract success to you and those around you by believing “I can.”

- **Persistence**
  - Possessing the inner drive to position oneself to overachieve daily.

- **Family Centric**
  - Valuing those around us as a source and beneficiary of our success.

- **Integrity**
  - Treat all with dignity, honesty and respect and you shall receive it in kind.

What impact have core values had for Resource during a down economy?

This has been a tough year for us, but we have found that employees who have a good understanding of our core values also understand their role within the company and what they must do to help us be successful. That is so important when times are tough, and it has helped us keep the right people on board. Those who are not aligned with our core values quickly stand out.

It seems that some organizations have given up on their core values in tough times. I guess those values were not really core. If they were, those companies would walk the walk and talk the talk, no matter what the economy is doing.

Our actions have remained consistent with our core values, and our people rec-
Do you have a favorite story about an employee who exemplified these core values?

I have a million of them! Perhaps our most important value during this economic downturn has been persistence: possessing the inner drive to overachieve daily. I have so many stories of people who have really dug deep to understand their strengths and weaknesses and worked to get better. That’s the proud story of the year. Many people have worked through their blind spots.

About Bardi Heating and Air Conditioning

Bardi is a family-owned business serving Atlanta since 1989. Originally known for commercial HVAC installation and service, the company expanded into residential service at the request of clients. Based in Norcross, Georgia, Bardi has been recognized as one of the top small businesses in Gwinnett County.

Bardi’s Core Values

- **Honesty**
  Always, always, always do the right thing.

- **Family Oriented**
  Family comes first over business.

- **Respect for the Individual**
  Treat others like you want to be treated.

- **Positive “Can-Do” Attitude**
  “Can’t” is not in our vocabulary at Bardi.

How did you develop your list of core values?

I’ve always had them personally, so it was pretty easy to translate them to my business. My direct reports know that whatever it takes, you always do the right thing. That’s the foundation of our core values: always, always do the right thing. Even if you mess up, admit your mistake and fix it. Running away just multiplies the problem.

Our second value is to honor family. I’ve got four children, so we’ve built our business around family responsibilities. We’re very cognizant that family comes first.

Our third value is respect for the individual. I’ve always encouraged treating others like you want to be treated. Even in a bad situation when you have to terminate someone (and I’ve done my share of that), I always treat them with respect and dignity. That simple Christian principle has served me well over the years in both my personal and business life.

Our fourth value is a positive can-do attitude. I surround myself with people who get it done. One of my favorite expressions is, “Can’t is not in our vocabulary at Bardi.” It may sound corny, but when you build a culture around that attitude, it’s pretty amazing what you can accomplish.

How do you communicate your core values?

We have them plastered everywhere, and managers always remind their teams of them. When we give out bonuses, we ask people what they did to exemplify core values.

How has the economic downturn affected your business?

We’re actually growing despite this economic climate, and I think our core values have a lot to do with it. Our customers know that we’ll do the right thing and make them happy whether or not it’s our fault. I tell my clients, “We’re gonna screw up. I employ human beings. They’re superstars, but they do make mistakes.” What differentiates us from our competition is that we’ll come back, figure out the problem, and solve it.

What else do you do to keep core values alive?

We’ve got what we call the “wheel of fortune.” It’s a big spinning wheel with prizes like $5, $10, $50, one day off with pay, etc. Whenever a manager sees someone going out of his way to help a customer or live out our core values, he asks that person to spin the wheel. It builds a lot of energy and enthusiasm for doing the right thing and has really changed our culture. Everyone wants...
to spin the wheel! Money is great, but people want to be recognized in front of their peers.

It sounds like you’ve built a lot of momentum.

That’s definitely true. When the economy first started going south, I told our people that we will not participate in a down economy. Everyone bought into that, and the positive attitude keeps our momentum on track.

Do you have a favorite story about these core values in action?

Actually, I have two. Recently, we put “Can’t is not in our vocabulary” to the test with a school renovation. Our major competitor said it couldn’t be completed in the ten weeks before school started. We didn’t buy into that and got the opportunity to prove it. It was a gigantic project, and we devoted forty men to work seven days a week. It was a grueling and exhausting ten weeks, but we lived up to our word and pulled it off.

But it’s not just the big jobs that are important to us. We have a guarantee that if you don’t like our work, we’ll remove the system and return your money. In twenty years of business, we only had to do that once until a year ago when we had a residential customer who was not satisfied. We bit the bullet and lived up to our creed to “always, always do the right thing.” A few months later, that customer called and asked us to fix a friend’s problem. That’s when you know that doing the right thing really is the right way to conduct your business.

About HealthCare Partners

Based in the Atlanta area, HealthCare Partners provides quality contract physicians to commercial, correctional, and government facilities nationwide and internationally. The company has experienced growth each year since its founding in 1996.

HealthCare Partners’s Core Values

- **Integrity**
  Doing the right thing no matter what the cost.

- **Passion**
  An intense emotional drive in your approach.

- **Empowerment**
  Stepping outside yourself to add value to others and help them find their own personal power.

- **Respect**
  Approaching everyone in a manner that when you leave, they have retained or enhanced their level of dignity.

- **Constant and Never-Ending Improvement**
  Seeking personal growth and progress in every endeavor.

- **Compassion**
  Caring about others so much that you seek to understand and help them.

- **Gratitude**
  A sincere appreciation, being mindful of all you are thankful for and showing it.

- **Humor**
  Incorporating fun and lightheartedness through laughter and playfulness.

- **Team Focus**
  Putting the needs of team before the needs of self.

How did you identify your organization’s core values?

About five years ago, we spent a day off-site to go through a process of developing them. Actually, we didn’t develop them; we *discovered* them. We got everyone in the company in a room, and we spent about three hours calling out every value that we thought applied to us personally or to the company. That resulted in about 300 words. Then, we eliminated multiple words that meant the same thing. From there, we went...
through the grueling process of getting them down to just a few. We tried hard to get four or five, but we finally decided that we really needed to keep the nine that we currently have.

Once we had the words, we tried to define them in a way that anyone can understand what they mean to us. For example, “passion” might mean different things to different people. We want to be clear about what we mean by passion.

These mini-definitions bring them to life for us. Again, it’s not like we just created a bunch of words to try to live up to. We simply discovered what we thought we already were. Thus, our culture naturally supports our values. We talk about them. We live them.

What is one unique way that you keep employees focused on your core values?

In our monthly company-wide meetings, we have someone tell a specific story about how another employee demonstrated one of our values that month. That is one way we keep people talking and thinking about them.

What are the most important benefits of clearly articulating your core values?

One major benefit is found in our hiring. We talk about those monthly stories in the interview process, and we make sure that prospects line up with our values before we hire them. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: you can teach skills, but you can’t teach values; you either have them or you don’t. We have found that those who share our values will more easily integrate into our culture and be successful. They might also be successful somewhere else, but at our company, core values alignment is the natural ingredient of success. Our values drive our culture.

What else do you do to reinforce your core values?

We are in the business of caring for patients, so one of our values is compassion. Each year, we do our own variation of Oprah’s reality TV series, the Big Give. We split our employees into four teams and give each team $1,000 of seed money. We then choose four charities to support; two are selected by us as the owners, and we survey our doctors and employees for the other two. Each team’s objective is to multiply the seed money to maximize the support for their charity. They meet the charities, identify their greatest needs, and respond. They volunteer, give referrals, connect the charity to important contacts – whatever is needed to maximize the use of the seed money. At the end of the program, we show a documentary video of each team’s experience. Everyone is in tears. It’s an incredibly moving experience.

Each time we begin this program, the general attitude is, “Yes, we’re compassionate, but we’re too busy for this.” But when you give, you receive so much more. Through the couple months of this program, we watch our employees transform as this value of compassion becomes more real to them.

This project also reinforces the value of teamwork. We pick the teams with purpose, connecting people from different areas of the company who normally do not work together.

Someone once asked, “How does this make money?” We can’t measure the value of it, but we know it has built our culture. We often say internally, “We’re trying to create something special in the marketplace.” Another tagline that we discovered is, “We care for you so you care for others.” This is part of our mission; it goes beyond making money.

How else do you keep core values alive?

We’re about to move into a new office, and we are planning to post our values and purpose all over. Another idea we have is to have them pop up on the screen anytime someone logs on to our intranet.

It is one thing to have a boss hold you accountable, but it’s more powerful when your peers do it. For example, people think integrity is a given, but when somebody says, “If we do this, nobody outside the organization will know,” someone inevitably responds, “Yeah, but we will know.” Once that happens a couple times, our people know that integrity is something we actually live. Our core values have empowered all of us to call someone out who is going against what we stand for.

How has the economic downturn affected your business?

There is still demand for our service, but clients are stingier with their money. Still, we have been blessed with tremendous growth in the last two years. We’re not necessarily that smart, but we are executing well.

What has your rapid growth taught you about your core values?

Knowing who we are and publishing it has drawn people to us. It’s not about us as owners; it’s the whole team. People say that our culture is what people want to be around – it’s what they hope they are signing up for when they accept the job. This has been a blessing because we’ve added more people this year than ever before. Eight of our 30 employees were added this year. Our core values have been a tremendous tool to communicate who we are. Of course, they never really know until they actually work here, but our retention is high. We’ve had only one person leave us this year. That is not typical in our industry.

Do you have a favorite story about an employee who exemplified these core values?

(Rhonda): Ruddy won’t say this, but I will. A CEO of a competitor who has been in our industry for a long time recently told one of our employees, “I don’t trust anyone in our industry except for Ruddy Polhill.”

(Ruddy): He must not know me very well! There are plenty of people who deserve that compliment. It does feel good to receive feedback – especially from a competitor – that we are living that core value of integrity. I am thankful for my team.

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