

FUTURE TALENT* LEARNING

BRITISH VALUES:
TAKING A BALANCED APPROACH TO VALUES-
BASED LEADERSHIP



Values can create competitive advantage, but also inflict pain.

We'd be hard pressed these days to scroll through a company website without happening upon some sort of statement of company values; those beliefs, principles or philosophies intended to underpin how organisations operate. They're seen as fundamental to company culture, driving employee experience and stakeholder relationships, crucial to decision making, an underpinning for true accountability.

"Does this match our values?" has become a mantra and rallying call. The right values and culture have been attributed to everything from employee motivation and morale to better product development and customer relations. **Research** even suggests that top executives believe that corporate culture influences productivity, creativity, profitability, company value and growth rates.

This does not mean, of course, that all is well in the world of corporate values and culture. That same research is also clear that those culture-loving executives are – frankly – often underwhelmed by their own performance, with the majority looking to improve their tone, operating style and behaviours. That's hardly surprising when we consider how difficult it is to operationalise concepts such as *respect*, *integrity* or *excellence*.

Consultant **Patrick Lencioni** goes as far as to say that "coming up with real values – and sticking to them – requires real guts." Values can indeed create competitive advantage, but they can also "inflict pain", risking some employees feeling excluded; limiting strategic and operational freedom; setting senior execs up for criticism. Most of all, they demand "constant vigilance".

If living by stated *corporate* values is difficult, how much more difficult might it be to imagine a set of values that seeks to encapsulate what it means to belong to an entire nation. Yet that's precisely what the UK's coalition government set out to do in its **2011 Prevent initiative an anti-radicalisation strategy** designed to tackle a perceived increased danger of home-grown terrorism and terrorist activity, whether from Islamic extremism or far right-wing political groups.

So was born the idea of **British values**, a blueprint for what it means to be a citizen in a modern and diverse Great Britain. By 2014, **guidance** had been issued to schools and educators, who, since then, have had an obligation to integrate those values into their teaching.

What are British values?

That's no different for Future Talent Learning, which is why you'll see these values popping up at various points across the curriculum. And, like so many stated corporate values, it would be hard to argue with the four core British Values:

- Democracy
- Rule of law
- Individual liberty
- Respect and tolerance for other beliefs and faiths

Essentially, they're about valuing our communities and celebrating diversity: buying into the responsibilities, as well as the rights, of living in a democracy. Commentators, including Ofsted Chief, **Amanda Spielman**, have been at pains to suggest that they represent values that are not *exclusively* British. After all, they feel like the kinds of values that should be shared by any democratic country, where people feel safe and valued, encouraged to contribute to a society that has all of our interests at heart. Just as in organisations, they are values that look to create an

environment where we respect each other and we're all working towards a common cause, a win-win focus on the common good.

Throughout our curriculum, we'll be actively exploring themes and topics that do just that. For example, we'll make it clear how crucial it is for leaders to obey the rule of law, whether around health and safety or anti-discrimination legislation and regulation. We'll identify why creating psychological **safety** in organisations and respecting (and harnessing) difference is essential for maximising individual contribution – and organisational success. We'll look at effective decision making; ethical influence; how to listen and communicate and to give enabling feedback, and how to confront and tackle the biases we all bring to work.

In fact, many of our core themes, which include self-awareness, mutual respect, trust, inclusion and empathy might be said to come straight out of the British values playbook.

The pitfalls of British values

For all our buy-in to the positive aspects of these generic behavioural values, we also have to acknowledge that British values are not without their detractors and, if not considered with care, their pitfalls. Just as Lencioni's poorly implemented corporate values "can poison a company's culture", the identification of particular values as "British" can also be problematic.

Critics have pointed to the fact that the use of "British" in this context is not as innocent as it might sound. For academics **Carol Vincent and Myriam Hunter-Henin**, the idea feeds into "broader narratives of Britishness" likely to generate suspicion towards the "other". Greater awareness of the problems of radicalisation and the adoption of British values as a bulwark and defence mechanism for tackling it, were not, presumably, meant to lead to Muslim children being accused of being terrorists on the school bus. But, unintended or not, that kind of targeting, tarring and exclusion remains both a risk and a reality.

Vincent and Hunter-Henin suggest that we need to beware the dangers of symbols and stereotypes. Instead, teaching in schools should focus on developing "political literacy and citizen engagement", giving everyone the skills to think critically for themselves and to participate actively in democratic politics and society. It's what Spielman calls equipping us to "fit in, succeed and belong".

That's not a million miles away from how Future Talent Learning looks at leadership. We want our curriculum to give leaders the skills they need to navigate complex and multi-faceted organisations; to guide, enable and inspire the diverse range of people for whom they are responsible. They also need the self-awareness to understand that this often involves confronting our own biases, difficult trade-offs and not a small level of finesse.

The great Mahatma Gandhi was himself aware of the double-edged sword that explicitly stated values can be, reminding us to "keep your values positive because your values become your destiny". Whether we're talking corporate values or the broader societal aspirations of British values, we'd do well to heed his warning.

Reflect

Reflect on how British values might impact on your leadership practice. Give an example for each of the four values.

This is a vocational apprenticeship programme. As such, learning is intended to be practical and experiential and to happen not just *while* you're at work, but *through* the work that you do.

