The communicative ins-and-outs of core values

A qualitative analysis of the communication process of 'innovation' as a core value in organizations

Anne Marie Lohuis
University of Twente - Enschede

Paper submitted to the University of Twente in fulfillment of the requirements of the Master degree of Communication Studies

University of Twente:

dr. H.A. van Vuuren
drs. C.L. ter Hoeven

Porter Novelli:

drs. M. Rigter
drs. P. Koopmans

June 24th, 2008

Index

The communicative ins-and-outs of core values: a qualitative analysis of the communication process of 'innovation' as a core value in organizations

Anne Marie Lohuis
University of Twente, Communication Studies, Enschede

Abstract This study explores the adoption, implementation, activation and evaluation process of core values in organizations, more specifically of 'innovation' as a core value. A qualitative study is presented, investigating the communicative success factors of value-driven management. This paper begins with a review of the literature about organizational values, organizational culture, management based on core values explicitly including the role of communication and finally 'innovation' as a core value.
The results indicate that core values are experienced as intangible concepts. Organizations use their official set of core values in different settings, dependent on contextual factors of the organizations. Communication is a very important instrument to implement and activate the core values and to give values meaning in employee's day-to-day activities. The managers' role appears to be of great importance, since they are the carriers and the deliverers of core values.
Innovation is a difficult core value with respect to employees' behavior. Innovation is more often related to organizational products or services than to working style. This makes 'innovation' difficult to implement in working activities. Communication related to innovation is based more on the creation of awareness and pride with stakeholders than on the stimulation of innovative behavior among employees.

Introduction

Values play an important part in nearly everything we do. The way people communicate and co-operate is strongly determined by values. They serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Rokeach, 1973). The very nature and the very meaning of these values have inspired philosophers and social scientists for decades. Because values are implicitly laid down in the way individuals make sense of stimuli in the cultural and social context, they can differ for every country, organization and individual. Particularly in the organizational context, disagreement and uncertainty concerning values are inevitable (Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004; Enz, 1986; Everts & Trompenaars, 2006), because of their effect on cooperation activities.

Every organization has to deal with the shared but occasionally conflicting values of its departments and members. Much research demonstrates that consensus about organizational values stimulates the effectiveness of an organization (Barrett, 2006; Collins & Porras, 1995; McCoy, 1985); they help in making decisions and solving strategic, organizational or operational dilemma's (Everts & Trompenaars, 2006). Conflicting values, however, can threaten the viability of the organization because they may lead to opposing ideas on doing business. More and more companies lay down an official set of core values, on the one hand to optimize the internal integration and coordination (Furnham & Gunter, 1993), and on the other hand to improve the external reputation (Kinds, 2000).

However, Enz (1986) and Dusschooten- de Maat (2004) note that you may never assume that there is alignment about the core values in an organization. Because of personal and departmental

differences, the shared experiences and day-to-day activities will influence the interpretation of the organizational reality. From this point of view, tuning a set of organizational core values is either difficult or even unrealistic. Not only the adoption of an official set of core values, also the implementation strategy is a process frequently underestimated by managers. They often assume that, once formulated, values are actually felt and embraced by the employees (Van der Loo, 2007).

Spreading (new) core values is generally considered useless when employees do not understand what values mean in their day to day activities and how they can change their daily decisions (Anderson, 2004; Klamer, Thung & de Jeu, 2001). Despite the fact that the use of values is obviously linked to organizational success, there is hardly any management information about how this is to be achieved. According to Gróf (2001) clear communication is of significant importance in the process of value building; it is essential in positioning values and corporate goals in an organization. However, the question if communication can actually influence employees' behavior and elicit cultural change is avoided by Gróf (2001). Other authors underline that core values are not imposable or cannot be enforced (Collins & Porras, 1996; Klamer, Thung & de Jeu, 2001) and that communication can only function to create awareness (Klamer, Thung & de Jeu, 2001). Nevertheless, the importance of communication management in the process of value and culture building is clearly recognized (Blanchard & O'Connor, 1998; Gróf, 2001), on top of the obvious importance of other fields of activity, such as stakeholder management, marketing or human resource management (Van der Wal, 2004; Begley & Boyd, 2000). What exact role and what surplus communication has in this process, remains an intriguing question.

Values are 'core values' when their influence on what people do supersedes that of most other values in the value system (Pant & Lachman, 1998). In organizations this holds good for values that establish objectives or are relevant for the choice which business actions are preferable to alternatives (Enz, 1986). A lot of values chosen or developed by organizations are seen as self-evident rules of conduct or cultural truisms (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006), such as 'integrity' and 'customer orientation'. Of course, no organization can survive by acting according to the opposing alternative values 'dishonesty' or 'customer unfriendliness'; this would be considered unethical. Core values like 'openness' and 'innovation' are less fundamental and more challenging to implement. E.g., what does innovation as a core value mean for the behavior of employees? How can innovation as a core value be incorporated and activated? By focusing on one specific core value leads to a better understanding of the communication and embedding process of core values.

This paper explores the role of communication in value-driven management using the core value 'innovation' as research case. In this paper first the literature on the subject is reviewed along the lines of core values, organizational culture, value-driven management and, more specifically, innovation as core value. Then, the research method, results and conclusions are presented. Finally, the discussion and limitations of this study are discussed.

Literature review

Core values

Social scientists have made many attempts to describe what values are and what function they have in people's lives (Oppenhuisen, 2000). They are often approached by defining what is good, valuable or desirable. Collins & Porras (1996) typify core values as the 'central and enduring tenets of the organization, which 'have intrinsic value and importance to those inside the

organization'. Following Van Luijk & Schilder (1997), core values are related more to what the organization wants to be and wants to be accountable for and what occasionally can be used as a decisive rule of conduct or line of action. These definitions illustrate the multiple approach of core values in the organizational context: related to the organizational identity or based on organizational future perspectives.

The difficulty in establishing a consistent theoretical and operational definition of core values is supported by Van Deth & Scarbrough (1995), who, after 40 years of writing, still found no consensus concerning the meaning of values. Core values exist in different context areas and relate to each other in different ways. In this research the focus is on the organizational core values. Despite the ambivalent and ambiguous character of the concept of core values, most theorists agree that organizational values are standards or principles (Collins & Porras, 1995; Enz, 1986; Van Luijk & Schilder, 1997) that unite the organization around a mission and vision (Van Luijk & Schilder, 1997; Van der Wal, 2004) and guide employees in their behavior; they are relatively stable over time (Collins & Porras, 1995), developing through the influences of culture, society and personality (Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004; Hofstede, 1991; Murphy & Davey, 2002).

Values are a fundamental aspect of organizations (Schein, 1985), as they are the implicit and broad principles that guide employees' behavior (Chatman, 1989). Organizations express their values in both their behavior and in their ideology (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006). Most of the time the official set of values expressed in the organizational ideology is not the same as those instantiated in employees' behavior. In fact employees will, in case the official set of core values is lacking, follow their individual value systems formed in their childhood and acquired from the society to which they belong (Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004; Soyer, Kabak & Asan, 2006). These individual values may or may not correspond with behavior that the organization finds desirable.

This contrast in values is explained by Collins & Porras (1996) in their classification of 'core' and 'espoused' values. Core values are effectively motivating employees in what they really do, while espoused values stand for what the organization wants to be, delineating its future perspective. The management challenge is to implement a strategy compatible with on the one hand the future perspective and on the other hand the existing core values. Yet, it is hard to discover what specific core values motivate organizational members' behavior. In fact, the management task is to discover and establish the meaning employees attach to their work and to implement a strategy compatible with values in line with these meanings (Pant & Lachman, 1998). However, in many situations this seems unrealistic, because people's values vary too much or the management prefers other values.

So the question is how to adopt the right set of core values and to motivate employees to behave according to them. An appropriate answer to this question requires knowledge of the meanings of core values in their organizational context. In contrast with the multidimensional definition of core values, there is consensus of opinion that core values form the heart of the organizational culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1984; Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004; Hofstede, 1991; Martin & Terblanche, 2003; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985). Hence a review of organizational culture is necessary to discover the origins and context of organizational values.

Core values in the organizational culture

As far as organizational culture is concerned, it often amounts to agreement on its existence and its importance; but the ideas on its exact nature differ a lot (Schein, 1985). Scientific literature offers many different ways to define organizational culture, but perhaps the most commonly

known definition is 'the way we do things around here' (Lundy & Cowling, 1996). Schein (1985) defined organizational culture as 'a pattern of basic assumptions and beliefs, developed by a given social group throughout its history of internal integration and external adaptation, that had worked reasonably well in the past to be considered by the group as valid and important enough to be passed on to new employees as the 'correct' way to interpreting the organizational reality'. In line with this definition, the organizational culture can be seen as the organizational identity (Miller, 2006), originating by way of a natural socialization process (Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004).

Some popular management writers, though, envisage organizational culture as a variable within the organization rather than being its identity. Cameron & Quinn (1999) presume that the organizational culture can be developed consciously by management teams who decide to improve their organizational performance in systematic ways. Peters & Waterman (1982) popularized the concept of the 'strong unitary culture' characterized by employees sharing the espoused values of top management.

Whereas the notion of 'shared values' seems to be an illusion (Enz, 1986; Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004), conflicting values seem to be a hazard. Diversity and decentralization can threaten the consistence of the culture within an organization or among different international headquarters (Begley & Boyd, 2000). Even though it seems impossible to characterize an organization by one organizational culture or one shared value system (Miller, 2006), management literature provides examples of managers coming to terms with the fragmentation and ambiguity of the organizational culture.

An official set of core values can contribute to optimizing the 'internal integration' and 'coordination' within the organization (Furnham & Gunter, 1993), they help creating more sense of unity (Enz, 1986), they help solving problems and avoiding disagreement (Everts & Trompenaars, 2006) and last but not least they ensure that everyone in the organization is on the same track (Robbins, 1996). If the organizational culture does not fulfill its function of 'internal integration' and 'coordination', this culture may significantly reduce the efficiency of the organization (Furnham & Gunter, 1993).

The consequence of the multidimensional character of the organizational culture is that the implementation of an official set of core values may be hard to realize. An interesting question is, in how far the organizational culture can be created and controlled by managers. Regardless of what the management sees as espoused values, employees will come to understand, through their own experience, how the company operates and what values are core values. If core values have such a strong influence on organizational efficiency and economical success, as pretended by many authors, it is worthwhile exploring what managers can do to win the hearts and minds of employees.

Value-driven management

Core values are an essential part of the organizational culture. According to Oomkes (2000) the organizational culture basically consists of communication and is formed through communication. This means at least that the culture is significantly influenced by communication (Eggink, 1993; Gróf, 2001). So, communication plays an important role in the implementation and activation process of core values in the organization.

What communication strategies and tools are needed in the process of value and culture building? Blanchard & O'Connor (1998) described management based on core values by differentiating

three phases. First, formulate the core values, second, communicate the core values, and third, implement them in day-to-day activities. According to them communication is especially important in the second phase. But also during the first en mainly the last phase of activation communication of core values is indispensable continuously. Continuity enhances the power of repetition; the more the core values are exposed, the more the employees will be invited and inclined to internalize them.

However, spreading (new) core values is considered useless when employees do not understand what they mean in their day to day activities and how they can change their daily decisions (Klamer, Thung & de Jeu, 2001). It is the very role of communication to explain these abstract concepts and transform them into clear and tangible rules of conduct, specifically related to the various jobs and tasks within the organization.

Hofstede (1991) pretends that values as such cannot be directly manipulated by managers, because of their abstract character. Indirectly however, they can influence the tangible characteristics and practices, like clothing regulations or yearly outings. This indirect approach suggests an implicit cultural change, without explicitly communicating the meaning and sense of core values. Also Klamer, Thung & de Jeu (2001) en Urde (2001) mention the difficulty of making core values explicit. Putting values in words is a laborious job; core values are not intended to be used directly in communication, since they may raise higher expectations than can be accounted for and run the risk of losing both their meaning and their value (Urde, 2001).

Besides internal communication, the need for external communication seems to become more and more important as well. On organizational websites, core values are often published and explained. Also in commercials and vacancies, the company core values are increasingly becoming part of the message. Kinds (2000) explains this development referring to the transparency of information in press and media. For organizations it is of great importance to show that their operations are based on specific clear values and that they also operate according to them. The obvious reason is that negative publicity will definitely harm the organizational performance.

To prove the commitment and activation of core values on the work floor, core value evaluation and assessments are sometimes mentioned as a fourth step in value-driven management. Instruments, such as evaluation interviews (Blanchard & O'Connor, 1998) and questionnaires among employees and external stakeholders (Reyneart, 1998) are frequently used indicators for the level at which values are alive and experienced. Also the importance of core values in the selection and recruitment processes is supported by Collins & Porras (1996) and O´Reilly & Pfeffer (2001). These tasks are often assigned to the human resource department. Because communication and human resource management overlap in business life, in this study the link to human resource aspects is taken into account in the data collection and analysis.

In brief, value-driven management comprises four fields of management, i.e. the adoption, implementation, activation and evaluation of core values. It is clear that, in all these fields, both implicit and explicit communication and internal and external communication play an important part. However, surprisingly, no concrete communication programs are identified in literature. This research project offers the potential to better understand the use and role of communication in value-driven management. Because this issue is too general and extensive for an in-depth analysis and valid conclusions, the research field was confined to the management context of one specific value. By focusing on one particular core value, in this study 'innovation', this research aims at clearly outlined and meaningful results.

Innovation as a core value

Innovation is hot. It plays a crucial role in modern business (Kivimaki et.al., 2000). Literature research by Van der Wal (2006) about the core values in public and private organizations demonstrates that innovation is frequently mentioned as a core value, especially in the private sector. This is not surprising; in today's competitive world the need to maintain current market positions and gain new markets marks innovation as a fundamental strategic issue in most companies (Christensen, 1997). Innovation is generally considered a source of competitive advantage and economic growth (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). It is commonly recognized that organizations should innovate in order to be effective, or even to survive. To implement innovation successfully in the organization, the basic elements of the organizational culture, i.e. the core values, beliefs and organizational behavior, play an important role (Martins & Terblanche, 2003).

But what does innovation mean as a core value? Innovation has been studied and defined in many scientific and management disciplines. Broadly speaking, innovation is defined as the creation or adoption of new ideas (Amabile, 1988; Daft, 1978). More specifically, at the organizational level, innovation is defined as the adoption of a new product, service, process, technology, policy, structure or administrative system (Daft, 1978; Damanpour, 1991). As a core value, innovation theoretically means that employees prefer innovation to other values (Pant & Lachman, 1998) as a guiding principle for their behavior. So the adoption of innovation as a core value in organizations means innovation has been given priority in comparison with seemingly contrasting values, such as avoiding risks and sticking to traditions. Organization websites often provide company-bound explanations of innovation. Random examples of this type of explanations are: 'We are always asking why, what if, why not' or 'We are constantly challenging ourselves to find better ways and better results' or 'We thrive on creativity and ingenuity'. These explanations of the value innovation are illustrations of what innovations should mean for employee behavior.

The organizational culture may contribute to the extent in which innovation occurs in an organization (Martin & Terblanche, 2003; Prajogo & Ahmed, 2006). Characteristics of an organizational culture that encourages innovation are tolerance of risks, support for change, participation in decision-making, creative managers and employees and a continuous orientation on learning and improvement (Martin & Terblanche, 2003). Furthermore, the attitude of top managers toward innovation influences the adoption process (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Prajogo & Ahmed, 2006), which is in line with points of view of Hofstede (1991) and Cameron & Quinn (1999) mentioned above. This means that organizations and leaders have to try to create a working environment in which innovation is accepted as a basic cultural norm.

Not only because of its popularity, but also because of its insensitivity to cultural truism innovation as a core value is a challenging issue. In comparison with other popular values such as 'respect' and 'integrity' innovation is, to a lesser extent, interpreted as a set of self-evident rules of conduct. In this research the meaning and the communication context of the implementation of innovation as core value will therefore be explored.

Research objectives

This paper is principally concerned with the exploration of value-driven management in organizations using communication tactics and tools. It discusses the success and failure rate of communication with regard to imposed values in the organization. In order to gain more profound, more detailed and concrete information and results, the research is further specified by focusing on one particular core value, i.e. 'innovation'. This leads to a general and a specific main question.

General main question

How are core values adopted, implemented, activated and evaluated in organizations and what is the role and surplus of communication in this process?

Specific main question

How is innovation as a core value composed, communicated and activated in organizations?

Method

Design

This study is of an exploratory nature, aiming at acquiring a more fundamental understanding of the role and surplus of communication in value-driven management. For this purpose, a qualitative study research has been conducted using semi-structured, non-directive interviews, focus group interviews and additional written documents. Conducting interviews is an effective way to explore in detail issues, events, feelings, knowledge and experiences and to discover relevant terminology and individual points of view on the subject (Patton, 2002). To further support the reliability of certain presumptions or patterns and to build out the diversity of opinions and perceptions (Patton, 2002), focus group interviews were held with a number of employees of participating organizations. Besides interviewing, written documents about core values were gathered to further analyze the communication strategy and methods used to present the core values to internal and external stakeholders. Using different data collection methods will support the data analysis and can improve the reliability of the research (Patton, 2002).

Participants

To answer the specific main question of this research it is essential to interview organizations having 'innovation' as a core value. This means a selection was made by means of purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). This selection involved 34 Dutch organizations that mentioned innovation as one of their core values on their websites. The respondents for the individual interviews were selected on account of their affinity with communication. By means of convenience sampling the focus group interviewees were recruited. This means the interviewer was dependent on the willingness of the organization to participate. The focus group participants were selected by the individual interviewees. In order to make the focus group reflect the participating organization optimally, the request was to compose the focus group as divers as possible, consisting of employees from various hierarchical levels and from different disciplines.

Interview guide

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the interview guide consisted of open-ended questions. The guide was based on the four fields of value-driven management reviewed in literature (Blanchard & O'Connor, 1998; Collins & Porras, 1996; Reyneart, 1998), i.e. adoption, implementation, activation and evaluation. Specifically questions on the failure and success factors during the different phases of the process were used to stimulate detailed accounts of attitudes and experiences.

The check-list dealt with the following subjects, focused on innovation as a research case:

- Meaning of core values
- Adoption of core values
- Implementation of core values
- Communication process of core values

- • Activation of core values
- • Evaluation of core values
- • Critical success factors

For each of these themes, a series of questions was developed. Questions were phrased in an open-ended style and linked with appropriate prompts that were updated as the study progressed. The interview guide of the focus group interviews was based on the same check-list but included more questions related to consensus or disagreement among the employees in order to stimulate discussion.

Procedure

The communication departments of 34 Dutch organizations were sent an invitation to participate in an interview about core values in general and more specifically about 'innovation' as a core value. Twenty-two of them were mentioned in the MT 500[1] companies list and 12 were found by purposive surfing on the internet. After contact by phone, 19 managers of 16 organizations (8 of the MT500 companies) were willing to participate in an interview. They included communication, HR, marketing and board managers. The organizations were of various branches: education, construction, fast moving consumer goods, publishing, energy and technical industry. The number of employees in these companies ranges from 20 to 475,000 worldwide.

In February, March and April 2008, 16 individual interviews were conducted; three of them with two interviewees. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted 1-1.5 hours. All interviews were performed by the same researcher accompanied by 1 of the 2 research mentors. The interviews were performed at a location chosen by the interviewees, in all cases at the office of the participating organization.
The gathering of written documents was dependent on the willingness of the interviewees to make company documents related to core values available. Except for confidential documents, most interviewees were prepared to hand over written or digital material including internal company documents or power point presentations, and all internal and external sources of information paying attention to core values.

Three of the participating organizations were willing to co-operate in a focus group interview. The participants were selected by the individual interviewees and composed as divers as possible. In the end one focus group consisted of three communication managers and two focus groups consisted of five and six employees from different disciplines. The participants were informed by e-mail about the research objectives and the interview subjects. These group interviews were held in April and May and lasted 1.5 hours. The focus group interviews were conducted by one of the research mentors and guided and observed by the author of this research. Also these focus group interviews were held at the office of the participating organizations.

Written consent and permission for audio-taping was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Of course, confidentiality was assured and all data were carefully anonymized.

Methodological quality

Within this research, several considerations may serve to optimize its validity and reliability. To improve the reliability (Boeije, 2005), a clear procedure for using a qualitative enquiry method has been adopted, and data collection, analysis and interpretation procedures have been clarified. The interview guide was tested by means of a pilot interview, to review the interview questions

---

[1] Dutch companies that score highest on image and reputation

and the style of interviewing. The interviews were all conducted in the company offices and recorded on tape. The gathering of complementary sources, such as annual reports and leaflets of organizations, internet sources and press cuttings, allowed the inclusion of new facts and ideas, and can increase the opportunity for checking interpretations and identifying patterns (Yin, 1994). By establishing that the data collection is a realistic reflection of the practice studied and supplies the right information to answer the research questions and by comparing the findings with conflicting and similar literature, the internal validity is optimalized (Eisenhardt, 1989; Patton, 2002).

Data-analysis

The data were analyzed using a modified version of the grounded theory. This approach consists of steps and procedures to connect induction and deduction by using systematic comparison, in order to generate a theory from the data (Patton, 2002). In the inductive phase, new themes were drawn form the interview transcripts, while in the deductive phase pre-existing categories (based on existing research) were used to organize the quotes. The grounded theory consists of three phases, viz. basic description, conceptual ordering and theorizing (Patton, 2002).

Basic description
The aim of this phase of analysis is to identify discrete concepts, which are the basic units of analysis in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, the individual and focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after interview conduction. By means of continuous analysis of the transcripts, the need for adjusting the interview guide was indicated. From the interview transcripts, the fragments relevant for answering the main questions were filtered. Through a process of comparing and analyzing, the fragments were labeled identifying preliminary themes within the data. The interview data related to innovation were separately analyzed. To provide an organized presentation of the labels, they were imported in an Excel file matrix. The matrix included a row for each label (n=49) and a column for each participating organization (n=16). After comparing, classifying and ordering all interview results, the most frequently cited labels were identified and grouped into key-labels (n=15) representing their overall meaning.

Conceptual ordering
In this phase the key-labels were defined and contextualized, in order to explore relations between certain concepts and existing theory. Due to the identification of conditions that give rise to the key-labels and the context in which they are embedded (Patton, 2002), some useful insights were provided. This is an intensive process of thinking, combining, using creativity and knowledge (Boeije, 2005).
Using the 15 inductively derived key-labels, a link to existing literature was made to gain more confidence in the emerged insights and perceptions. Thus the analysis turned increasingly deductive.
The interview data suggested that the organizational history and size have great influence on the way organizations deal with core values. Support for this was found in Collins & Porras' (1996) and Klamer, Thung & de Jeu's (2001) work, who underline the role of contextual factors in the adoption process of core values. The finding that top mangers are seen as the proper owner for core values can be clarified by the fact that values get their meaning in a certain context (Van der Wal, 2006) and that managers have most influence on organizational activities (Hofstede, 1991). Remarkable was the limited attention for the evaluation process of core values in the interviews. An explanation for this is given by Deal & Kennedy (1984), who clarifies that most organizational measuring methods are traditionally focused on economical performance and financial effectiveness and less on the immaterial values.

After verifying the key-labels in existing literature, they were ordered according to the subjects of the interview guide and grouped into 5 framing categories. The labels attached to the focus group interviews transcripts were also compared with the labels of the individual interview transcripts; in case they matched, the focus group interview labels were integrated in the key labels or corresponding framing categories emerged from the individual interview transcripts. Because the implementation and activation process of core values are often used indiscriminately, these phases have been grouped together in one category.

Theorizing

The aim of this final phase of analysis is to build a conceptual framework from which to develop a grounded theory (Patton, 2002). For this purpose, 'communication' has been identified as a core category which all other categories concerning the four steps of value-driven management relate to. This move from lower-level concepts to higher-level theorizing (Patton, 2002) is quite a challenge and often ends up in generating theory bits (Glaser, 2000) in stead of a grounded theory. In this study, this stage of analysis has been moderated. Because of the wide range of this study and the enormous amount of variables playing a role in value-driven management, further research is necessary to elaborate and confirm a coherent theory. Therefore, the findings will be presented thematically, based on the formulated framing categories. Table 1 provides a report of the five framing categories deduced from the key labels.

Table 1: Framing categories deduced from key labels

Key Labels	Framing categories
• Meaning and function of core values • Organizational size • Organizational history • Recent development	Core values: interpretation and context
• Ownership • Formulation of the core values • Procedure	Adoption of core values
• Responsibility of the top • The role of the communication department • The role of human resource management	Implementation and activation of core values
• Low priority • Frequent measurement	Evaluation of core values
• Motives and meanings • Implementation and activation process • Communication related to innovation as a core value	Innovation as a core value

Findings

The findings in this study will be rubricated following the categories and key labels emerged from the data.

Core Values: interpretation and context

Meaning and function of core values

Core values are seen as fundamental assumptions, both identity-related and ambition-based, that support the organizational mission and vision. According to some of the interviewees their core values are based on the company's strategic policy, while others presume the strategic policy is based on their core values. These two examples illustrate this different approach:

'...to actually get some framework for your program for the next 4 years, these are just the phrases that we use...and then somewhat more powerful, since the vision and mission are really long texts here, so whatever can you say about that'. [2]

'Core values have more continuity than strategic goals that are set for four years, but those core values do determine what choices you make on the basis of a SWOT analysis'. [3]

Only one third of the interviewees initially connected core values to employees' behavior and co-operation. However, as the interview proceeded, the link with employees' behavior became increasingly clear, especially when talking about the implementation and activation of core values. So in general, the core values were initially regarded as guiding principles for organizational vision and mission and subsequently as guidelines for employee behavior.

The focus group interviews demonstrated that most employees experience core values as intangible and abstract concepts. Although they generally agree with the official set of core values, they have difficulty in explaining what the core values exactly mean to them. Examples of the participants that illustrate this obscure character of core values were:

'It is very easy to mention some slogans, but what can you do with them. It is more topical and externally focused, but when is it really true? What do those slogans mean?' [4]

'...they are focused more on emotions than on being really measurable'. [5]

The interviews revealed that the managers' approach of core values mainly depended on two organizational characteristics, viz. size and history.

Organizational size

For big, especially multi-brand organizations with different offices in the Netherlands and abroad, the core values provide the glue that holds the organization together; they create a strong sense of unity. Besides that, they are presumed to contribute to creating a recognizable and consistent image for the outside world. For an organization which is split up in different fields of work, it is

---

[2] *'...om eigenlijk een beetje een kader te krijgen voor je programma van de komende 4 jaar, dat zijn gewoon de termen die wij gebruiken...en dan iets krachtiger want de visie en de missie zijn wel een hele lap tekst bij ons, dus zeg daar maar eens iets over'.*

[3] *'De kernwaarden zijn van een grotere constantheid dan de strategische doelstelling die 4 jaar geldt, maar die kernwaarden bepalen wel welke keuzes je op basis van een swot analyse maakt'.*

[4] *'Het is wel heel makkelijk wat kreten te noemen, maar wat kan je er mee? Het is meer actueel en naar buiten toe, maar wanneer is het ook werkelijk zo? Wat betekenen die kreten dan?'*

[5] *'... ze zijn veel meer op emotie gericht dan op dan ze ook echt meetbaar zijn'.*

imaginable that the creation of one organizational culture is more difficult than for a small organization. The following statements of two communication managers of big international companies illustrate these premises:

'...surely in our organization, where only professionals are at work and everybody individually has customer contact and hits the road under the company flag to actually … those core values and what we go for and the brand behind the person visiting the customer, and how we are recognizable and differentiating in comparison with our competitor'.[6]

'This is a decentralized company; because of that corporate awareness and investment in one brand is nearly absent. I notice this in my daily work with our subsidiaries. It is difficult to have all subsidiaries think for the entire company. Isolated on their own island, they do not feel involved in the corporate interests which thwart the value-building process'.[7]

The data indicate that in smaller companies with only one sector of industry, the core values function more as a tool to create awareness or as an external justification for the company's existence, products or services. Managers of relatively small organizations tend to define core values as concealed assumptions that need not be activated explicitly. The explanation for this lies in the central drive in the organization; people tend to work on the same product or service and the communication lines are shorter. However, in case organizations are growing fast and need to recruit and employ a lot of new people, managers feel an increasing need to implement and communicate the core values to monitor and maintain the organizational culture. The next two statements of communication managers illustrate these findings:

'...I think that when the company gets too big and too indistinct and when you get too many blood groups under one roof, you have to agree on core concepts to deal with your identity'.[8]

'The need to activate core values arises from our wish to recruit a lot of new employees and to realize acquisitions and takeovers abroad. With so many new companies it is important that new employees get to know about our culture and values right away'.[9]

Organizational history
The older the company, the more the core values are intercalated in work operations and experiences; they have gradually developed over the years. For instance, the managers of long-history organizations note that their core values are experienced by everyone in and outside the organization, because it is clear what the brand stands for. They stated, for example:

---

[6] *'...zeker bij onze organziatie, waar toch alleen maar professionals werken en idereeen individueel klantcontact heeft en erop uittrekt onder de bedrijfsvlag om toch die kernwaardem en waar we voor staan en het merk achter de persoon die bij de klant zit en hoe we daarin herkenbaar zijn en onderscheidend ten opzichte van onze concurrent'.*

[7] *'Dit is een hele decentrale organisatie....Daardoor is het belang van corporate, het belang van groepsdenken, het belang van wij hebben een merk en we moeten investeren in dat merk, dat is er niet. Niet zo heel erg sterk dat, dat merk ik mijn dagelijkse dingen die ik doe met die werkmaatschappijen, maar in dat proces over nadenken over kernwaarden voor het hele company, het hele bedrijf dat was wel heel erg lastig om al die werkmaatschappijen voor het hele bedrijf te laten denken. Want die werkmaatschappijen zit ook in hun eigen koker. Die zitten allemaal op een eigen eilandje, die denken helemaal niet na over het corporate belang, over het geheel en dat bemoeilijkt het hele proces'.*

[8] *'...ik denk op het moment dat het te groot en te onoverzichtelijk wordt en dat je teveel bloedgroepen onder een dak gaat krijgen, dat je dan naar dat soort kernbegrippen moet om houvast te krijgen bij je identiteit'.*

[9] *'..want nu die noodzaak om echt te gaan activeren komt ook voort uit het feit dat we heel veel nieuwe medewerkers willen binnenhalen en aquisities en overnames in het buitenland gaan doen. En als er zoveel bedrijven bijkomen is het gewoon heel belangrijk dat zij, meteen als ze binnenkomen, van dit is de cultuur en hier staan we voor en dit zijn onze waarden'.*

'...but our identity has of course for the greater part been developed and therefore speaks for itself... we are just a small section of a very big company, so we just go along with all that is internationally happening; we derive our identity from what is created and developed there'.[10]

'Look, you don't change your core values. Organizations that have existed for more than 116 years, they practically float on certain values'.[11]

Also the focus group participants, who were all members of organizations with quite a long history, attached much weight to historical events.

Newly founded organizations or merged organizations do not have long histories yet. These organizations will use core values first of all as a shared starting-point based on future ambitions. A communication manager of a newly founded organization stated:

'We really had image-driven core values, actually not very special, because at that time we did not exist yet. There was no identity either, there was nothing'.....'so there is no mentioning the fact that core values are guiding principles and that we will derive our organization plan from them; on the contrary, it's the other way around'.[12]

Recent development
Obviously, the official set of core values was adopted less then 5 years ago by 80% of the participating organizations. This demonstrates the recent popularity to lay down an official set of core values. Some of the interviewees experienced this development as a hype that is unavoidable.

Adoption of core values

Ownership
In most organizations, the board of directors or the top management laid down the official set of core values on their own, often supported by an external advice office. The data revealed that the more people are involved in the adoption process, the more difficult it is to reach agreement about core values. Even if the organization plans to do so, consensus about values just seems unrealistic. The following reply of a communication manager illustrates the difficulty in involving every employee:

'Really, it is a bit of wishful thinking, so many people, so many wishes. To adopt satisfying core values for more than 3000 employees is impossible. The risk of having 3000 employees fill out something is that it will end up in the most harmless, ambitionless profile'.[13]

The results of both the individual interviews and the focus groups interviews show that the CEO or the Management Team is seen as the proper owner of core values, because they are responsible

---

[10] *'...maar bij ons is de identiteit natuurlijk voor een groot deel opgebouwd en die bestaat voor een groot deel als vanzelfsprekend bijna...wij zijn gewoon een kleine organisatie van een hele grote toko, dus wij liften gewoon mee op alles wat daar internationaal op gebeurd; wij ontlenen ook onze identiteit aan wat daar allemaal is gecreeerd en gebouwd'.*

[11] *'Kijk, je kernwaarden verander je niet. Ondernemingen die 116 jaar bestaan, die drijven eigenlijk op bepaalde kernwaardes die er zijn'.*

[12] *'Ja, we hadden dus echt imago-gestuurde kernwaarden en ja op zich ook niet heel erg raar, want we bestonden nog niet. Er was ook geen identiteit, er was niets...dus het is niet zo dat er gezegd is, onze kernwaarden zijn leidend en daar gaan we onze instellingsstratgie van afleiden, nee het is andersom'.*

[13] *'Daar zit toch een stukje wishfull thinking bij, zoveel mensen, zoveel wensen. Over 3000 medewerkers kernwaarden te kiezen waar iedereen zich happy bij voelt gaat toch niet lukken en het grote gevaar is natuurlijk, als je alle 3000 medewerkers wat laat invullen, dat je uiteindelijk op het meest risicoloze, ambitieloze profiel uitkomt'.*

for the organization's policy. The statement below illustrates a board member's attitude in the value adoption process:

'I was working on the strategic policy and I had the feeling that on one point, we missed something. So, I started thinking about the kind of core values here. In the end, I came up with these four core values and I submitted them to a number of people within the organization and people recognized them right away. So, in a very short time, the core values were fixed'. [14]

Surprisingly, most of the interviewed managers had not met any objections of employees to the core values formulated by the board. Only in educational organizations, they experienced some resistance of the employees. This was clarified by the organization structure in which a lot of autonomous professionals work.

Formulation of the core values

The difficulty of adopting a set of official core values has been confirmed by many participants. What are our goals, what is important, what is our image, what is our future? …are mentioned by the participating managers as relevant questions in the adoption process. The values were mostly based on what the interviewees mentioned: 'the brand navigator, a strategic plan, a manifest for growth, an internal branding project or a project for repositioning the organization'.

Besides internal factors, the external environment also influences the adoption of certain core values. It is obvious that organizations intend to distinguish themselves from their competitors as to their core values. Six interviewees explicitly mentioned the importance of exclusive core values. As one communication manager of an educational organization said:

'It has been said that the core values must reach a certain abstract level, but at the same time somewhat discriminating, preferable not the same values as our competitors'.[15]

The data even indicated that the external function of core values is sometimes perceived as more important than the enactment of employees. The next statement illustrates the organizational compliance to social expectations:

'…the government wants organizations to act socially responsible, so they will set the terms for deliverers. If we do not comply, we'd better put an end to it. So, we are forced to act according these demands, but to say it is what we want at all costs….'[16]

However, there were also organizations that were less sensitive to external factors and underlined their uniqueness in the way meaning and fulfillment are given to the core values. This answer illustrates this approach:

'At this level, the core values are most general and not differentiating. They only become relevant when you start matching them with our products and working method, because then it is possible

---

[14] *'Ik was toen bezig met het strategisch beleid en had het gevoel dat we op dat punt nog iets misten, dus ik ben gewoon voor mezelf gaan nadenken, van wat zie ik nou aan kernwaarden hier..dus ik kwam op die 4 kernwaarden…die heb ik vervolgens aan een aantal mensen voorgelegd en dat riep veel herkenning op, dus eigenlijk in een hele kort tijd, was het katje gewassen'.*

[15] *'Dus er is echt wel gezegd dat het een redelijk abstractieniveau moet hebben maar tegerlijkertijd wel enigzins onderscheidend, dat je wel bij voorkeur niet dezelfde waarde als onze concurrenten zouden kiezen'.*

[16] *'…de overheid wil steeds meer maatschappelijk verantwoord ondernemen, dus die gaan eisen stellen aan leveranciers. Als wij dat niet doen, dan kunnen we wel inpakken. Dus we worden gedwongen om dat te doen, maar dat ik nou zeg dat het iets is wat wij perse zouden willen..'.*

to translate them into concrete terms. I can imagine that these values sound familiar to you, also in other companies'.[17]

Procedure

Remarkable was the result that more than one third of the interviewees did not have any idea about how the core values were exactly formulated. A frequently given answer to the question how the core values were adopted was:

'It is something tabled by the board and top down communicated as the core values'.[18]

In half of the participating organizations, the interviewees were familiar with the fact that an external advice consultancy office was recruited to support the adoption process. They were recruited to do research among both the employees and among external stakeholders, in order to get a better understanding of the organizational internal and external position. The participants mentioned tools such as interviews, questionnaires and brainstorm sessions to support this process.

Interviewees that were closely involved in the adoption process described intensive, long-lasting stages of discussion and decision-making. The following description by a corporate communication manager is a striking example of such a process:

'This adoption process lasted one and a half year. This was done together with an external advice office, investigating, thinking and from a broad perspective we gradually arrived at insights and input that led to certain choices...and step by step we formulated these five core values that cover the load of mentality. So, you do not want to know how many hours were put in that process'.[19]

Implementation and activation of core values

Responsibility of the top

Several communication managers emphasized the importance of the top managers' responsibility for and dedication to core values:

'I could not have done it without their endorsement; they are, so to speak, the carriers and the deliverers'. [20]

'The advantage we had was that our director fell ill in late 2005 and that we got a new one from Ireland. He sort of thought up all this, and that helped tabling it here within the company. We learn a lot from his drive'. [21]

---

[17] *'Op dit niveau zijn ze zo algemeen, niet onderscheidend. Ze worden pas relevant denk ik als je ze gaat matchen met onze producten en werkwijze, want dan kan je daar een concrete vertaalslag aan geven. Ik kan me voorstellen dat deze waarden je wel bekend voorkomen, ook bij andere bedrijven'.*

[18] *'Ja, dat is echt iets dat vanuit de board bedacht is en min of meer naar beneden gecommuniceerd is, van jongens dit zijn onze kernwaarden'.*

[19] *'Dat is een proces geweest van anderhalf jaar. Dat is samen met een extern adviesbureau gedaan, gaan onderzoeken, gaan nadenken en van een hele brede trechter komen we steeds fase voor fase tot inzichten en input waar we bepaalde keuzes in maken.... en geleidelijk aan kom je tot deze 5 kernwaarden die de lading mentaliteit moet dekken. Dus dat is een proces hoeveel uren daarin zijn gestopt dat wil je niet weten'.*

[20] *'Ik zou het niet kunnen doen zonder dat ik hen mee had, zij zijn de dragers en uitdragers zeg maar'.*

[21] *'Het voordeel dat wij hebben gehad is toen eind 2005 ons toenmalige directeur ziek werd en wij een nieuwe directeur kregen uit Ierland, die zeg maar dit hele... mede bedacht heeft en dat heeft het wel helpen uitdragen hier intern zeg maar. Wij pikken heel veel mee van zijn drive'.*

Also the focus group participants agree that the board of directors plays the most important role in the dissemination and observance of the core values. The examples below illustrate this opinion:

'It is awkward that we are all company sectors with a lot of independence. That is why I think the board of directors should implement the core values in the organization'. [22]

'It plays in particular at management level; how do you manage the organization, what choices do you make? When you make the wrong choice, things can go terribly wrong, then the values are at stake. They should not recruit the wrong people'. [23]

Apparently, top managers are seen as the prominent communicators of values. After analyzing the written documents gathered during the interviews, the abstract and general character of the way the core values are communicated by the top managers is remarkable; they speak in terms of future perspectives, front lines and vision for realization. Although core value communication is strongly determined by the top of the organization, the role of the communication and human resource departments were surely demonstrated as well.

The role of the communication department

The data show that communication plays, without any doubt, a very important role in the implementation and activation process of core values on the work floor. The communication department, however, has a 'secondary' responsibility. Their tasks were mainly to translate the core values into concrete behavioral action, to activate them on the work floor by means of transfer of knowledge. The most important success factors in this process were the adaptation of the core values to local or national circumstances and the integration and combination of different communication tools and strategies.

The translation of the core values into concrete behavioral examples or rules of conduct is not as easy as it seems:

'As a corporate organization you can display your brand, your goals and your core values, but the final translation into their meaning for the individual employee or individual customer, that is something people underestimate too easily'. [24]

The translation of core values into concrete instructions was often done in dialogue or brainstorm sessions with the employees. A few employees underlined the importance of core values being part of a greater whole; they should not be isolated terms. Communication of the core values should be integrated in strategy presentations or activities. The next two quotes of focus group participants illustrate the importance of clear communication:

'You should focus your communication on the individual person, not on everybody. What's in it for me? Communication is the tool, but the message ought to affect people and they have to have

---

[22] *'Het lastige is dat wij allemaal deelbedrijven zijn met een grote zelfstandigheid. Daarom vind ik dat het directieteam de kernwaarden moeten laden in de organsiatie'.*

[23] *'Het speelt vooral op directienivea;, hoe bestuur je de organziatie, welke keuzes maak je? Als je verkeerde keuzes maakt kan het goed fout gaan, dan komen de kernwaarden in het geding. Ze moeten geen verkeerde mensen werven'.*

[24] *'Je kunt als corporate organisatie wel zeggen dit is ons merk en dit is onze brand en hier staan we voor en dit zijn onze kernwaarden. De uiteindelijke vertaling naar wat het voor het individu betekent of voor de individuele klant, daar wordt veel te makkelijk over gedacht'.*

a clear vision of them. In that case, it doesn't matter what you call it, as long as it is comprehensible. Core values are empty notions'. [25]

'The communication of the board of directors is not optimal. I miss the sense of solidary, the proud feeling...I think that the board should communicate the core values more actively; they do not do that enough. After the departure of our marketing manager, we have been in a void, because he really marketed our brand'. [26]

The participants of the bigger and international companies emphasize the importance of local communication and implementation in the different international offices. In this approach the responsibility of implementing and activating the core values is assigned to the local communication and HR departments. The following two statements illustrate the importance of the local implementation of core values:

'... what you do try to do on the basis of these core values, to translate them for the Dutch situation.....if I want to bring them closer to the people, I cannot hang an English poster on the wall reading 'let's teamwork', but you can use the ideas and digitals they deliver'. [27]

'We made a little difference in core values of the working societies and those who were more applied to the head-office. It is not the story of 'one size fits all', for that does not work out, because there are cultural differences...exchanging knowledge is important, but you cannot use the same model everywhere, because markets differ essentially'. [28]

The communication managers proposed integration and combination of different communication tools and strategies to inform employees about the core values. The interviewees distinguished internal and external communication and implicit and explicit communication. The choice between internal or external communication is related to the function the organization attributes to its core values.

In case the core values are used to create more sense of unity, the focus is subsequently more on internal communication. Not only company websites, but also posters, internal magazines, brand flyers, PowerPoint presentations, informal activities and company logos were mentioned as tools to give expression to the core values internally.

In case the core values function as external justification or to improve the recognizability of the organization, the focus is more on external communication. Websites, ambassadors, symposiums, bursaries, and press and media were mentioned as tools to communicate the core values externally.

---

[25] *'Je moet je communicatie richten op het individu, niet op z'n allen. What's in it for me? Communicatie is hierin een middel, maar de boodschap moet mensen raken en mensen moeten het duidelijk voor zich hebben. En dan maakt het niet uit hoe je het wilt noemen, als het maar begrepen wordt. Kernwaarden zijn loze begrippen'.*

[26] *'De communicatie vanuit de directie is niet optimaal. Ik mis het saamhorigheidsgevoel, het trotse gevoel een beetje....ik denk dat de directie actiever kernwaarden moet communiceren; dat doen ze niet voldoende. We zitten nu een jaar in de luwte na vertrek van marketingmanager, die ons merk heel erg uitdroeg'.*

[27] *'..wat je wel probeert te doen uiteraard op basis van deze waarden, je vertaalslag te maken naar de Nederlandse situatie.....als ik het dichter bij de mensen wil brengen, dan kan ik hier niet een Engelse poster ophangen met let's teamwork...de ideeen die je aangedragen worden kun je wel gebruiken...'.*

[28] *'Het is niet het verhaal van one size fits all, want dat werkt namelijk niet, je zit met culturele verschillen...kennisuitwisseling is belangrijk maar je kunt niet zeggen we gaan datzelfde model overal maar op dezelfde manier hanteren, markten zitten toch wezelijk anders in elkaar' .*

In most cases, internal communication is ranked prior to external communication. Though internal and external communication are more or less identical, a few organizations adjusted their communication to the different types of recipients. In the majority of the participating organizations the implementation process was started with explicit communication, to subsequently activate the core values implicitly.

'As to the strategic policy we have not really explicitly communicated the core values but we have formulated the strategy in five very compact goals that we have communicated extensively in company. They are formulated in such a way that the core values are recalled in them'.[29]

In some of the organizations, there was a conscious choice for communicating the core values implicitly in order to avoid resistance of employees. As one of the managers of an educational organization said:

'And, of course, that is how we influence the core value discussion, by taking care that our products reflect these values. Not by facilitating a discussion of core values...the more you put on paper on core values, the more probable that the organization will react allergically. A random customer of ours should never hear the word core value, that is so uninteresting'.[30]

The success factor mentioned most frequently in communication is giving continuous attention to the core values without imposing them. The following answers of a board member and a focus group member respectively underline this idea:

'By giving attention to them again and again, they increasingly come alive...you should not force them upon people, but just turn them into self-evident elements in you story. So there are different channels to communicate through...but pounding them into people, that is childish, that is trivializing them. So you ought to pay attention to them, but I consider it more as a gradual process, frapper toujours, than as a focused effort to implement a particular core value the coming half year... that way it won't work'.[31]

'You have to make it important; you have to give it time but also keep up the continuity. Currently, the process goes with ups and down; sometimes you do not hear anything for a while, then it is a gigantic act again. It should happen more fluently and continuously. You should define the process well and embed it in the strategy'.[32]

So it turns out, core values have often been used as content and channel in internal and external communication. The apparent conclusion is that the task of the communication department is more of a supporting and facilitating kind.

---

[29] *'We hebben naar aanleiding van het strategisch beleid niet zozeer de kernwaarden expliciet gecommuniceerd, maar meer dat we het strategisch beleid in een 5-tal hele korte doelstellingen geformuleerd hebben die we uitvoerig gecommuniceerd hebben in huis. Die zijn zo geformuleerd dat de kernwaarden daarin terugkomen'.*

[30] *'En dat is natuurlijk wel hoe wij invloed moeten uitoefenen op de kernwaarden discussie is door producten die wij bieden er voor te zorgen dat het daar invulling aan geeft. Niet door een discussie te faciliteren over kernwaarden.....hoe meer je over kernwaarden op papier zet, hoe groter dat de organziatie daar allergisch op reageert. Een willekeurige klant van ons moet het woord kernwaarde nooit horen, dat is zo oninteressant'.*

[31] *'Door ze steeds meer naar voren te halen, gaan ze in toenemende mate leven.....je moet ze niet dwingen, maar gewoon een vanzelfsprekend onderdeel van je verhaal laten zijn'. Dus het zijn wel verschillende kanalen waarlangs je dat kan communiceren....maar het er echt instampen, dat is flauw, dat is baggataliseren. Dus je moet er aandacht aan besteden, maar ik zie het meer als een geleidelijk process, frapper toujours, dan als gerichte inspanning van komend half jaar gaan we even over op die kernwaarden...zo werkt het niet'.*

[32] *'Je moet het belangrijk maken, je moet het tijd geven, maar wel de continuïteit erin houden. Nu gaat het proces met vallen en opstaan; dan hoor je een tijd niets, dan is er weer een gigantische act. Dat moet meer vloeiend en continu verlopen. Je moet het proces goed definiëren en opnemen in de strategie'.*

The role of human resource management

In nine of the sixteen participating organizations, the human resources department is also mentioned as an important facilitator in the implementation and activation process of core values in the organization. From the interviews it appeared that the core values increasingly determine the recruitment and selection of new employees. Advertising core values in vacancies and using them in selection interviews are ways to recruit and retain suitable people for the organization.

Core values are also used as guidelines in the formulation of key competences and in evaluation interviews. Remarkably, these values appear to be relevant mainly in management assessments. Cleaners, for instance, will be assessed on different competences. One of the interviewees illustrated this as follows:

'We recruit people on the basis of core values more and more, surely people in key positions, so with respect to specialists, top managers, top executives. From there this starts slowly seeping down, but it is a slow and implicit process. And as for as assessment and accountability are concerned, it holds good for key positions, but not for the cleaners'.[33]

Another HRM task is organizing training sessions and workshops to motivate employees to apply core values in certain situations. This can contribute to understanding the values in day-to-day activities. The impact of HR processes in this field is much more binding than solely core value information activities. Interviewees confirm that it is actually the collaboration of communication and HR management that can activate core values in employee behavior.

All in all, the interview data seem to indicate that the success rate of implementing and activating core values through all hierarchical organization levels is not very high. Although all of the interviewees were convinced the core values suited their organization, only 50% of them were able to list them. Only one fifth of the managers indicated that the employees would be able to recall the core values. Many focus group participants emphasized that the core values are not really incorporated in the organization yet; the implementation and activation process was still developing and employees needed more intelligible information. This is, of course, also related to the initial stages of core value incorporation in which most organizations still find themselves.

Evaluation of core values

Low priority

In most of the interviews, the evaluation process was not extensively discussed, because a lot of organizations were not that far yet in the process of value-driven management. This explains the interviewees did not have any experiences in this field. They did have an idea about future steps, but often hinted its priority was low. Because core values are no hard notions, like structures, procedures, strategies and budgets, they are difficult to measure. As one of the interviewees said:

'They are not measurable items; they can't be quantified or qualified. They are goals that you make yours, but they are not measurable'.[34]

Frequent measurement

---

[33] *'Wij zijn in toenemende mate mensen daarop aan het werven, zeker de mensen op sleutelposities, dus bij specialisten, topmanagers, het topkader. Daaronder begint het langzaam door te sijpelen, maar dat gaat toch wat langzamer en niet expliciet. En in termen van beoordelen en afrekenen, dat geldt wel voor de sleutelposties maar niet voor de schoonmakers'.*

[34] *'Het zijn geen meetbare dingen; je kunt ze niet kantificeren of kwalificeren. Het zijn doelen die je jezelf oplegt maar ze zijn niet meetbaar'.*

However, in some of the organizations frequent measurement supports the entire value building process. A few organizations started with a culture-check in order to set up a zero measurement; they developed specific evaluation surveys to check their core value agreement and core value experiences of employees. The greater number of the organizations, however, did not have the intention to develop a specific tool to measure or evaluate the appropriateness and the enactment of their core values. Usual evaluation tools, such as customer satisfaction surveys, image and reputation research and internal employee engagement surveys were used or would be used to indicate what core value related aspects could be improved or could provide stimulants to keep improving.

Innovation as core value

Motives and meanings

Innovation turns out to be an often cited organizational core value. The interviewees were asked why innovation was one of the core values of their organization. Their arguments often amounted to a lot of innovative examples; mainly products and services were mentioned, but also programs, policies and processes of innovation. Another argument was their number of patents. The reason to innovate was, on the one hand, based on the fast changing external environment and, on the other hand, based on the drive to change the external environment. As the following answers illustrate:

'For us innovation is evident; if you do not innovate now, you won't exist tomorrow, so innovation is front line and part of our strategy and has to be implied in our company values'.[35]

'...you see, to be socially involved so much that you start thinking about innovative solutions for certain problems and to be able to actually provide these solutions en to invest in them...so to give people the opportunity to imagine things not asked for'. [36]

Most participants had great difficulty in describing what innovation exactly mean for employees' behavior. Creativity, curiosity and entrepreneurship were values often mentioned as synonymous when describing innovation. Interviewees also indicated that those value labels were more appropriate for the behavioral context:

'Innovation is not a human value; I feel it is more of a technical, an instrumental value...actually curiosity is more or less the same as innovation, which is a far more emotional concept'.[37]

Still some employees experienced innovation as an abstract and container concept. The question that came up was: when can something be typified as innovative? In one focus group interview, innovation as a core value did not ring a bell with the participants; they concluded that innovation was self-evident in their work. Their market turned out to perceive them as a very innovative company. They themselves hardly recognized their innovativeness because it was so much an integral part of their work. The next two statements of focus group participants illustrate the abstract character of innovation as a core value:

---

[35] *'Eigenlijk is innovatie voor ons heel evident. Als je nu niet innoveert, dan ben je er morgen niet meer. Dus dat is echt een speerpunt, het zit ook heel erg in onze strategie en dus moet het ook wel heel duidelijk in de bedrijfswaarden zitten'.*

[36] *'Snap je, dus zo maatschappelijk betrokken dat je nadenkt over innovatieve oplossingen voor bepaalde problemen en die ook daadwerkelijk kan aanbieden en daarin investeert...dus door mensen de gelegenheid te geven om dingen te gaan bedenken waar niemand om heeft gevraagd'.*

[37] *'Innovatie is geen menselijke waarde, ik vind het altijd meer een technische, een instrumentele waarde is dat, terwijl nieuwsgierig is eigenlijk hetzelfde als innovatie..dat is een veel emotioneler begrip'.*

'What is innovation? When is something new and for whom? In my view this used to be much more, then we were more of a hobby club; now we are developing much more, for there is also less freedom'. [38]

'We combine knowledge into something new, but is that innovative?' [39]

Another aspect that seems to influence interviewees' perceptions of what innovation as a core value means was the sector of industry. In technical industry and construction innovation is mainly translated into technical progress and new products. In educational organizations innovation is interpreted as entrepreneurship. In fast moving consumer goods organizations innovation is strongly related to marketing activities and in health care organizations the interviewees talked about developing new medicines and innovative work processes.

Remarkably, when comparing the meaning of innovation to the general meaning attached to core values, innovation is interpreted more as an end target and less as a driver in employees' activities. This means that innovation as a core value tends to be connected more with future achievements and to be less based on organizational culture.

Implementation and activation process
The implementation and activation of innovation as a core value was mainly realized in properties attached to the organizational culture (Martin & Terblanche, 2003). *'We give our people time and opportunities to develop ideas that nobody asked for', 'we stimulate new ideas and are open to new ideas', 'we invest in the development of new products, 'we need people who dare to make mistakes', 'we are able to predict the future needs of our customers', 'we try not to lapse into traditions', 'our labs are innovative', ' we have the opportunity to work outside our work field', 'we are number one in our market', 'we use the latest programs'* were examples given by managers and employees to give shape and meaning to innovation in their organization.

Only few interviewees described their organization culture as very conservative. In these organizations innovation is considered as their core business and as a value less dependent on their organization culture. For example, a manager of a pharmaceutical industry association mentioned:

'Innovation is our internal strength, the way in which you want to progress with your products, but talking about the way companies are organized, that is very traditional; it sounds contradictory, but that is the way it is'. [40]

Innovation is often selectively activated on the work floor. Less than half of the organizations shared the opinion that innovation is important for everybody within the organization. Selective activation is often explained by the need of certain competences to be innovative in working activities and by the conviction that being innovative is not possible in all working activities. These statements illustrate this explanation:

'The one behind the desk here, is she is innovative as well?...No, very clearly, because the decision-makers here are according to me, the technicians and salesmen...for innovation you

---

[38] *'Wat is innovatie? Wanneer is iets nieuw en voor wie? Naar mijn idee was dat vroeger veel meer, toen waren we meer een hobby club; nu zijn we veel meer aan het ontwikkelen, want er is ook minder vrijheid.'*

[39] *'Wij combineren kennis tot iets nieuws, maar is dat innovatief?'*

[40] *'Innovatie is onze interne kracht, de manier waarop je met je producten vooruitgang wil boeken maar als je het hebt over de manier waarop bedrijven zijn georganiseerd dan is dat heel traditioneel, het klinkt tegenstrijdig maar het is wel zo'.*

need creativity and in case you are very creative, you will not end up behind the desk so quickly'. [41]

'You cannot be innovative in everything, for that is a bit dangerous, that is just impossible'. [42]

Some statements reflected that the activation of innovation can also be affected by prevailing other core values in the organization, e.g. reliability and quality. Although these latter values were not adopted as core values in the organizations involved, they were experienced to be of similar or even more importance than innovation. The two statements below illustrate this clash of values:

'The knowledge and the environment is made to improve innovativeness, but rule number one in our blood and genes is to avoid all risks...' [43]

'What I see, especially concerning innovativeness, that the last few years, ...we could do with a little bit less, because you just cannot be the best and the most innovative organization at the same time. It is much easier to say, there are innovative people and people who are the best...' [44]

Finally activation of innovation is also connected with time and money. Also that the meaning attached to innovation tends to influence the type of activation; in case innovation belongs to the core business, it is activated differently from cases in which the organization expects their employees to think beyond boundaries.

Communication related to innovation as a core value

Communication serves to word, to explain, to transfer, to stimulate and to confirm innovation as a core value in organizations. Mainly because of the multi-dimensional character of innovation as a core value and its selective activation illustrated in the two paragraphs above, communication seems to be very important to explain its meaning for every employee.

Examples to stimulate innovative behavior through communication, as mentioned by the interviewees, were: 'an idea box, brainstorm sessions, creativity workshops and an innovation award. Other support mechanisms mentioned were the employment of innovation managers or a research and development department or centre.

It seems that innovation as a core value needs more explicit proof points than other values. An explanation for this might be the connection of innovation to tangible products or services, something you can explicitly show. Besides that, innovation is probably less interpreted as a self-evident rule of conduct, because the interviewees do need the stimulation and confirmation to be really innovative. This has its influence on the communication process of 'innovation' as a core value as well. External communication about an innovative product or idea is also experienced to have a charismatic effect on the employees; it can be used as a means to show and prove innovativeness. As one of the participants said:

---

[41] *'Degene die hier bij de balie staat, is die ook innovatief?...nee, heel duidelijk want degenen die het hier voor het zeggen hebben, zijn naar mijn inziens de technneuten en verkopers....voor innovatie heb je creativiteit nodig en als je heel creatief bent kom je niet zo snel achter de receptie terecht'.*

[42] *'Wij zijn niet in alles innovatief, want dat is een beetje gevaarlijk, dat kan helemaal niet'.*

[43] *'De kennis en de omgeving is er voor gemaakt om inovatie naar een hoger plan te trekken, maar wat dus ook in ons bloed zit en in ons DNA, is om alle risico's uit te sluiten...'*

[44] *'Want wat ik zie, met name met innovativiteit, dan de laatste tijd, ...het mag wel een tikkeltje minder want je kun helemaal niet de beste en de meest innovatieve zijn. Het is veel makkelijker om te zeggen, je hebt mensen die innovatief zijn en je hebt mensen die het beste zijn....'*

'Of course, we want to show the external world, media, stakeholders and consumers, that we are an innovative company and we do have a number of proof points for that, as to investments, products we introduced...that are really innovative. We strongly emphasize this in our communication. And innovativeness is something we continuously want to communicate….innovation is a key message, collaboration is not and neither is accountability, as such…' [45]

Also employees that are not assessed on innovative behavior, get the instruction to communicate the message of being an innovative organization:

'That is a bit difficult.., how innovative is somebody in his job? Of course, our people get the procedures we offer, but he does have to disseminate the message of being innovative'. [46]

Conclusions

The conclusions are given along the line of the two main research questions, preceded by a description of the meaning of core values and the contextual factors playing a role in this study.

Core Values: interpretation and context

The meaning the participating managers contribute to core values is very divers. The general perception of the interviewees of what core values are, lies between 'core' and 'espoused' values as defined by Collins & Porras (1996) and includes aspects of both the core value definitions of Collins and Porras (1995) and van Luijk & Schilder (1997) reviewed above. However, they are seen more as key words that support the organizational mission or vision than as guiding principles for employees' behavior.

From the findings the conclusion can be drawn that organizational members generally have a positive attitude towards core values; they are seen as the most important characteristics of the organization that distinguish them from other companies and that have developed over the years. Although employees have difficulty in explaining what the core values exactly mean to them, they do think the core values can have a surplus in the working environment. Mainly in organizations with long histories, the members underline the core values as a basis for a strong organizational culture.

In general, management knowledge about the best way to build a value-driven organization is limited. An explanation for this may be the complex character of core values and the recent development to explicitly lay down an official set of core values.

General main question

How are core values adopted, implemented, activated and evaluated in organizations and what is the role and surplus of communication in this process?

The findings show that value-driven management is influenced by many situational factors: the organizational history and its stability over the years, the organizational size, whether or not it is an international organization and the type of employees.

---

[45] *'Wij willen uiteraard laten zien aan de buitenwereld, media, aan stakeholders, consumenten, dat wij een innovatief bedrijf zijn en daar hebben wij een aantal proof points voor, qua investeringen, qua producten die wij geïntroduceerd hebben....en die echt vernieuwend zijn. Dat benadrukken wij heel sterk in onze communicatie. En innovativiteit is iets dat wij eigenlijk continu willen communiceren....innovatie is echt een key message, collaboration niet, accountability ook niet as such.....'*

[46] *'Dat is een beetje lastig.., hoe innovatief is iemand in zijn werk? Onze mensen krijgen natuurlijk de procedures aangereikt die wijzelf bieden, maar hij moet wel de boodschap uitdragen van innovativiteit'.*

In all the participating organizations, the adoption of the official set of core values was carried out by the top management. In organizations with a long history, these values are often distilled from the existing values that have developed over the years and can be defined as identity-related values. In newly founded and merged organizations, the values are more often based on the espoused values of the top management, because they did not have had the opportunity to develop a strong organizational identity yet. In these organizations the core values are more ambition-based. Consequently the implementation and activation of values is of more importance, because they have not yet been internalized in the organization. Of course, the degree of internalization is strongly related to the stability of the organization over the years; previous mergers and a high degree of employment mobility will decrease the development of shared values (Schein, 1985).

Mainly in big international companies covering different sectors of industry, the interviewees experienced or explained difficulties in laying down a set of core values covering the whole business segment. Different countries deal with different social values (Hofstede, 1980). That makes it more difficult to lay down an official set of them that fit every international subsidiary company. Especially in these organizations, the surplus of core values seems to be very important in creating a sense of unity and a clear business focus. Therefore, adaptation of the core values to local or national circumstances is very important.

A lot of employees assigned a strong responsibility to the top managers concerning the adoption of core values. However, from the interviews with managers of educational organizations, it can be learned that in organizations employing a lot of relatively autonomous professionals, there is more resistance concerning the core values. In professional, decentralized organizations, the best management tool would be creating a strong organizational culture, in which employee involvement is very important (Verbiest, 2000). However, the interview data make clear that the involvement of employees is generally experienced as an inconvenience because it can delay or even hinder the core value adoption process.

Also external factors increasingly determine the establishment of an official set of core values. Quite a lot of organizations try to distinguish themselves from their competitors by formulating distinctive core values. Also the authorities' demands with regard to corporate social responsibility and the opinion of customers and stakeholders considerably influence the adoption process. However, when an organization does not act according to their adopted values, it can harm the organization's reputation (Kinds, 2000). Although these socially desired values are often in line with legislation or cultural truisms, the question is whether or not they can motivate organizational employees? (Pant & Lachman, 1998). Adjustment to socially desired values will anyway hinder the implementation and activation process, in case they do not match with the existing core values of the organization. Therefore, value-driven management is of crucial importance (Kinds, 2000).

In most organizations and particularly in international companies the core values have been top down formulated by a select party of top managers, often supported by external consultants. These consultants are often recruited to avoid commotion among employees, due to their assumed objectivity and impartiality (Delmotte & Sels, 2005) in distilling and formulating the most experienced and most desirable values. The core values were often deduced from a developed brand navigator or a re-positioning plan. In a few organizations, the employees participated in this process as well, but in most cases only key persons in the organizations were involved. The top managers were also seen as the proper owners of core values, because they are responsible for the organization's policy. Also during the implementation and activation of core values top managers are seen as the prominent model presenters and supporters.

The focus group interviews' results reveal that active communication is important for employees. Without any communication, it is hard to make values come alive, especially because they are such intangible concepts. Combining all the communicative success factors of the implementation and activation of core values, three communication steps emerge from the data:

1. The implementation starts with knowledge transfer. In this stage it is important that the core values are part of contextual activities or goals, such as the organizational strategy or vision, to get employees to understand their significance and usefulness. To get broad support for the official set of values, examples from the past can be used as proof to convince the employees the values befit the business.
2. In the next stage, the core values have to be translated into concrete behavioral rules of conduct, so the employees understand what the core values amount to in their everyday activities. The findings show the importance of involving the employees in this process. In international companies, the local application and practice is essential. In this stage core values must be integrated in HR-guidelines, such as evaluation interview guides, development plans and recruitment and selection criteria.
3. When employees understand what the core values mean and also underline them, the core values have to pop up regularly in communicative interaction and other organizational activities. Managers recommend not to let go. Though the values are often observed to a certain extent, regular exposure to them can enhance the process of awareness and compliance (Gróf, 2001).

Communication can be divided into, on the one hand, external and internal communication and, on the other hand, implicit and explicit communication. In the first stage of knowledge transfer, explicit communication is of great importance. Some organizations consciously choose to communicate their core values mainly implicitly, to avoid resistance of employees. Communication of core values that are not recognized by the employees can lead to less commitment (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006).

Some organizations choose to communicate different core values externally from those internally or they do not communicate the core values externally at all. It is important to tune the internal and external core values to avoid obscurity or vagueness (Gróf, 2001).

The findings derived from the focus group interviews show that employees have difficulties to exactly explain the meaning of the values in their daily activities. Although they could not exactly list the official set of core values, they did agree with the appropriateness van the adopted values. So, in other words, the values were mostly confirmed, but they were not perceived as major drivers of attitudes or behavior. In this context, the core values were perceived more as cultural frame of reference than as a personal drive.

The evaluation of core values is still uncultivated scientific terrain. Based on the findings, only little can be said about the evaluation process of core values. Most interviewed managers did not have any experience with evaluation processes related to core values. Because of their abstract character core values are generally not seen as measurable. Evaluation interviews, customer satisfaction surveys and employee engagement surveys could generate indicators for measuring the experiences and the compliance with core values by employees.

Specific main question

How is innovation as a core value composed, communicated and activated in organizations?

The organizations with 'innovation' as a core value can be split up in organizations that innovate because of the pressure of the fast changing society and in organizations that create innovative products or services as their core business. As a core value, 'innovation' is mainly interpreted as the creation or adoption of a new idea, a product, process or service (Daft, 1978). It is remarkable that innovation is often attached to a specific working activity or organizational objective instead of being a guiding principle for all employees' working activities. While core values are defined as important principles for everybody in the organization (Collins & Porras, 1996), this research reveals that innovation is mainly considered relevant for only a select party in the organization. In this context, 'innovation' as a core value is mainly seen as an end target and less as a motivator in employees' behavior. The participants explained that it is impossible to be innovative in everything; in some situations innovation will clash with other values.

The fact that innovation sometimes clashes with other values and even has to give way to them, as revealed from the data, explains the selective application of innovation. In comparison with other values, such as 'integrity' or 'respect', innovation is also much more dependent on organizational characteristics. Employees must not only be motivated to show innovative behavior, but they should also have the opportunity to innovate (Projago & Ahmed, 2006). Creating and maintaining an environment that supports innovation is essential. Characteristics of such an environment are: stimulation of and opportunities for new ideas, taking risks, a drive for problem solving and for continuous improvement, and economical investments. Although the working climate in most of the participating organizations was typified as open and flexible, the culture in one of the organizations was described as very conservative. Two explanations for this were, first, the traditionally conservative sector of industry and, secondly, the fact that the core value innovation was not meant to typify their working style, but simply referred to their core business, i.e. the development of innovative medicines.

All in all, organizations with 'innovation' as a core value are working on an environment that stimulates innovative behavior. Apparently, innovation is less interpreted as a self-evident rule of conduct, because the findings show that managers use a lot of support mechanisms to stimulate innovative behavior. Brainstorm sessions, an idea box or an innovation award and also the employment of innovation managers demonstrate the need to activate innovation on the work floor.

Because a lot of organizations profile themselves as innovative, some of the participants see 'innovation' as a container concept and a trendy phrase. They wondered when it was a question of innovation and when a question of mere development. It seems that 'innovation' compared to other values needs more explicit proof points. The number of patents is seen as a good instrument to measure innovativeness. Besides that, communication is seen as an important tool to stimulate and show organizational innovativeness. That is why 'innovation' is mainly externally communicated in terms of innovation awards and the presentation of new products or services.
Managers emphasize that external communication can also have an impact on internal stakeholders. The organizational image according to outsiders can serve as a catalyst for reflection and redrafting of how employees define the organization (Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

Discussion

Much has been written about internal and external advantages of an adopted set of core values. However, the advantages described in literature, such as the optimization of internal integration and coordination (Furnham & Gunter, 1993) and the improvement of the external reputation (Kinds, 2000), are difficult to place in the complex and intangible organizational culture in which values originate (Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 1985). It is presumed that the organizational culture

develops by way of a natural socialization process (Dusschooten- de Maat, 2004) through internal integration and external adaptation (Schein, 1985). The difficulty is the contrast that core values are, on the one hand, implicitly present in organizations, but, on the other hand, used as management tools to control the organizational culture.

This contrast makes it difficult to formulate an unambiguous definition of core values and use a similarly clear approach of value-driven management. If the official set of core values matches the implicitly presented values of the organization culture, it would be expected that they do not need to be implemented and activated anymore. However, this study indicates an increasing need to internalize the official set of core values on the work floor, especially in the big multi-brand organizations.

In former times, organizations did not explicitly express their core values. Nowadays, more and more organizations want to show the outside world how they operate (Kinds, 2000). This development is a consequence of the blending of traditionally separate values systems of the public and private sector (Van der Wal , 2006) on the one hand, and the increasing transparency of information in press and media (Kinds, 2000) on the other hand. The question could be raised what organizations actually want to achieve with their official set of core values.

In every line of approach in of this study, the official set of core values seems to be a mixture of ambition-based and identity-based concepts, which are developing in a cyclical process of natural socialization and managerial control. This is in line with Dusschooten- de Maat (2004) and Hofstede (1991), who pretend that managers' influence on working activities can manipulate the importance of certain values that consequently guide employees' behavior. The results of this study reveal that managers often use the core values for the purpose of achieving strategic goals and creating a recognizable and consistent company image for the outside world. Although most managers emphasize that their core values represent their organizational culture, they also seem inclined to comply with socially desired values instead of using identity-based values.

This contrast between core values representing the organizational identity (Miller, 2006) and core values used as management tools (Cameron & Quinn, 1999) became evident in this study in the way the official sets of core values were adopted. Conflicting with Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga (2006), who underline the importance of exploring core values by analyzing employees' behavior, most organizations deduced their official set of core values from brand navigators or strategic plans. Also the fact that newly founded and merged organizations lay down official sets of core values makes clear the values are not deduced from the organizational culture, but are much more ambition-based notions.

However, adopting socially desired values in the official set of core values can be risky (Kinds, 2000; Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006). When an organization claims to have certain core values which are apparently not manifested on the work floor, they use core values only as window dressing to improve the company's appearance or even to create a falsely favorable impression. Based on this premise, the question rises what core values actually stand for and how meaningful they actually are.

In this context, the internalization process is of great importance to prove compliance to the core values externally communicated. Obviously, a lot of socially and managerially desired values are in line with legislation or cultural truisms (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006). Some authors underline that core values are not imposable and cannot be enforced (Collins & Porras, 1996; Klamer, Thung & de Jeu, 2001), but it is unimaginable that employees would not accept values such as 'integrity' or 'respect'; they are recognized as self-evident (Schein, 1985). This

self-evidence may explain why the participating managers met little or no objection by employees. However, self-evident rules of conduct are not always manifested in employees' behavior (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006). It appears that people are likely to agree with cultural truisms, but are also likely to lack support for them (Maio & Olson, 1998).

This study suggests that continuous communication, internally as well as externally, is of great importance, in order to motivate employees to comply with the values. In contrast with Hofstede's (1991) suggestion to implicitly implement values in day-to-day activities, most organizations use explicit communication in order to create awareness and behavioral change. The interview data suggest that the translation of core values into clear rules of conduct is very important to enable employees to deal with them in their day-to-day work. Core values as disconnected notions do not affect the employees (Van der Wal, 2006); they must be integrated in HR policies and working activities. Still, it seems not easy to make them come alive on the work floor; most employees do not perceive them as major drivers in working activities but mainly use them as a cultural frame of reference.

In comparison with values such as' 'respect' and 'integrity', innovation is much more experienced as a difficult value to define with respect to employee behavior. This can be explained by the differences in value-types. In the majority of the participating organizations, 'innovation' as core value was related with an end product or service. According to Rokeach (1973), values of this kind can be typified as 'terminal values'; they describe an idealized and desirable end state of existence, a final resultant of a developmental process. 'Respect' as core value can be typified as an instrumental value, which idealizes modes of conduct and is meant to guide day-to-day work. Based on this difference, instrumental values related to innovation are, for instance, 'taking risks' and 'teamwork'.

This approach fits well in an iceberg model, where the top of the iceberg describes the terminal values, such as innovativeness and quality and where the bottom of the iceberg underneath the water describes the moral and ethical values, such as respect and integrity. On the waterline the instrumental values are implemented and activated, become visible and tangible in behavior. To realize the top values, the fundamental values underneath the water are an essential basis. These fundamental values are comparable to the self-evident rules of conduct as dealt with by Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga (2006).

Because innovation is adopted in official sets of core values in addition to other instrumental values, this sometimes leads to obscurity. Innovation is often assigned to a select party in the organization, because organizations want to be innovative in a specific working activity; this means just a few people in an organization actually deal with 'innovation' in their work. To implement and activate innovation on the work floor, managers should develop rules and norms that lead to innovation. Compared to 'respect', the enactment of which is not dependent on time and investment, 'innovation' as a core value also needs an environment in which opportunities are created to activate them (Martin & Terblache, 2003; Projago & Ahmed, 2006).

All in all, this study reveals that the official set of core values often consists of ambition-based, espoused values of the top managers. Although none of the organizations explored their real core values based on behavior analysis, it might be interesting to gain an insight into the gap between the real and desired values to improve the implementation of the desired core values (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006). Managers are seen as the most influential people affecting core value observation, so they need to contemplate what they are trying to achieve with the official set of core values; furthermore they need to be clear about the purpose of introducing interventions where organizational values are concerned (Murphy & Davey, 2002). In this

context, the balance between what you externally communicate to be and how you are internally organized is important enough to be taken very seriously; the organizational reputation may be at stake.

Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature and has several limitations that should be considered. From a methodological point of view, this study is limited by the data analysis that relies entirely on the perspective of one person (Patton, 2002). Because of the dependence on the willingness of organizations to co-operate in this study, the sample was not randomly composed. However, the sample was very divers in organizational size and branches, so it seems to be representative. Although this study might represent the examination of only a small sample of interviews, the last few individual interviews suggested a point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions or relationships with respect to value-driven management emerged. This means theoretical saturation was reached (Patton, 2002).

The results concerning employees' experiences have to be handled cautiously, given the fact that the analyses were based on a limited number of focus group interviews, a small number of participants per interview and one non-representative composition of a focus group. Therefore, the focus group interview results were mainly used to support the data interpretation rather than comparing group experiences with the results from the individual interviews. This approach contributed to the validity of the overall research conclusions.

The choice to focus on the particular core value 'innovation' worked out very well. From the findings it was confirmed that organizational managers are hardly aware of the meaning of their core values in daily practice, but mainly use them as a cultural frame of reference to create awareness and recognizability. By comparing the definition of core values given by the interviewees with the meaning of innovation as core value, the gap between the interpretation of core values and their activation can be discovered. By extricating a specific value, the real meaning and content of a core value can be evaluated.

The purpose of this study was to gain an insight into the role and application of communication in value-driven management in order to generate a theory from the data. This could not be realized. Because of the wide range of this study and the enormous number of variables playing a role in value-driven management, further research is necessary to confirm and elaborate a coherent theory. All in all, this study reveals an interesting report of organizations dealing with core values and may help managers to make their communication strategy fit for value-driven management, a concept which is becoming increasingly important (Kinds, 2000).

Future research

With regard to core values, still a lot of areas are unexplored. Four possibilities are noted, based on the findings of this study.

First, this research points out that value-driven management is a complex phenomenon. Future research should focus more on a single step in value-driven management in stead of capturing all the four steps, to get more detailed information about the communication process.

The findings provide further support for the assumption that value-driven management is a process influenced by context and pragmatism. The organizational context, in which core values are applied, should not be omitted in future research. It would be valuable to do research into the function of core values and value-driven management with respect to the organizational

characteristics of history and size. For that purpose qualitative research might be the best method (see Patton, 2002).

A third research possibility is to replicate this assessment of value-driven management in a few years, in essence exploring how managers and employees might have altered their conceptions over time. Mainly because value-driven management is still in its infancy in most of the participating organizations, research could be done in the progress of their value-driven management process.

Because 'innovation' as a core value seems to be less obvious than others values, organizational communication with respect to innovation seems to be of greater importance to enhance awareness, enactment and justification. Following this premise, it is an interesting question whether or not the importance and content of communication are related to the degree of self-evidence of core values or to the type of values in view of the distinction between instrumental and terminal values, as defined by Rokeach (1973).

Acknowledgements

References

Amabile, T. M. (1988). A model of creativity and innovation in organizations. *Research in organizational behavior.* 10, 123-167.

Barrett, R. (2006). *Building a value- driven organization: a whole system approach to cultural transformation*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Begley, M. T., & Boyd, D. P. (2000). Articulating Corporate Values through Human Resource Policies. *Business Horizons.*

Blanchard, K., & O'Connor, M. (1998). *Normen en waarden [Managing By Values].* Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact.

Boeije, H. (2005). *Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek: denken en doen [Analysing in qualitative research: think and act].* Amsterdam: Boom Onderwijs.

Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Chatman, J. A. (1989). Improving interactional organizational research: a model of person-organization fit. *Academy of Management Review.* 14, 333-349.

Christensen, C. M. (1997). *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1995). *Built to last: successful habits of visionary companies.* London: Random House Business Books.

Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1996). Building your company's vision. *Harvard Business Review.* 74(5), 65-77.

Daft, R. L. (1978). A Dual-Core Model of Organizational Innovation. *Academy of Management Journal.* 21, 193-210.

Damanpour, F. (1991). Organizational Innovation: A Meta Analysis of Effects of Determinants and Moderators. *Academy of Management Journal.* 34 (3), 555-590.

Damanpour, F., & Schneider, M. (2006). Phases of the adoption of Innovation in Organizations: Effects of Environment, Organization and Top Managers. *Britisch Journal of Management.* 17, 215-236.

Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (1984). *Corporate cultures: the rites and rituals of corporate life.* Amsterdam: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Delmotte, J., & Sels, L. (2005). HR-outsourcing: kans of bedreiging? [HR-outsourcing: opportunity or treat?]. Leuven: Federgon, Onderzoekscentrum Personeel & Organisatie.

Dusschooten- de Maat, C. A. M. (2004). *Mensen maken het verschil [people make the difference].* Assen: Koninklijk Van Gorcum.

Eggink, E. J. M. (1993). *Handboek interne communicatie [Handbook internal communication].* Utrecht: Het spectrum.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review.* 14 (4), 532-550.

Enz, C. A. (1986). *Power and shared values in the corporate culture.* Michigan: UMI research Press.

Furnham, A., & Gunter, B. (1993). *Corporate Assessment: Auditing a Company's Personality.* London: Routlegde.

Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity, image, and issue interpretation: sensemaking during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly.* 41, 370-403.

Glaser, B. G. (2000). *The future of grounded theory.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Gróf, A. (2001). Communication in the creation of corporate values. *Corporate Communications: An international Journal.* 6 (4), 193-198.

Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences. International Differences in Work-Related Values.* London: Sage Publications.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind.* Londen: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Kinds, E. L. (2000). *De Hearthunter: gids voor waardengedreven leiderschap [The Hearthunter: Guide for value-driven mamagement].* Schiedam: Scriptum.

Kivimäki, M., Länsisalmi, H., Elovainio, M., Heikkilä, A., Lindström, K., Harisalo, R., Sipilä, K., & Puolimatka, L. (2000). Communication as a determinant of organizational communication. *R&D Management.* 30 (1), 33-42.

Klamer, A., Thung, R., & de Jeu, M. (2001). Waarden doen ertoe voor een bedrijf [Values matter for a company]. *Filosofie in bedrijf.* 3, 27-34.

Lundy, O., & Cowling, A. (1996). *Strategic Human Resource Management.* London: Routlegde.

Martins, E. C., & Terblanche, F. (2003). Building organizational culture that stimulates creativity and innovation. *European Journal of Innovation Management.* 6 (1), 64-74.

McCoy, C. S. (1985). *Management of values: the ethical difference in corporate policy and performance.* Boston: Pitman Publishers.

Miller, K. (2006). Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes. Belmont, CA [etc.]: Thomson Wadsworth

Murphy, M. G., & Davey, K. M. (2002). Ambiguity, ambivalence and indifference in organizational values. *Human Resource Management Journal.* 12 (1), 17-32.

Oomkes, F. R. (2000). *Communicatieleer [communication science].* Meppel: Boom Onderwijs.

Oppenhuisen, J. (2000). *Een schaap in de bus: onderzoek naar waarden van de Nederlander [A Method of Inventory Values and Value Dimensions: Values of the Dutch].* Amsterdam: Philip Stroomberg.

O'Reilly, C. A., & Pfeffer, J. (2001). *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Pant, P. N., & Lachman, R. (1998). Value incongruity and strategic choice. *The Journal of Management Studies.* 35 (2), 195-197.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluations methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Peters, T. J., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's Best run Companies.* New York: Harper & Row.

Prajogo, D. I., & Ahmed, P. K. (2006). Relationships between innovation stimulus, innovation capacity, and innovation performance. *R&D Management.* 36, 499-510.

Reyneart, E. (1998). *Handleiding Social Auditing: een stapsgewijze ontwikkeling naar duurzaam ondernemen [Manual Social Auditing: stepping-stones towards sustainable management.].* Leuven: Acco.

Robbins, S. P. (1996). *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies, Applications.* New York: Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs.

Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values.* New York: The Free Press.

Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Soyer, A., Kabak, O., & Asan, U. (2006). A fuzzy approach to value and culture assessment and an application. *International Journal of Approximate Reasoning.* 44, 182-196.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Urde, M. (2001). Core value-based corporate brand building. *European Journal of Marketing.* 37 (7/8), 1017-1040.

Van Deth, J. W., & Scarbrough, E. (1995). *The impact of values*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Luijk, H. J., & Schilder, A. (1997). *Ethiek en corporate governance: patronen en verantwoordelijkheid [Ethics and corporate governance: patterns and responsibility].* Schoonhoven: Academic Services.

Van Rekom, J., Van Riel, C. B. M., & Wierenga, B. (2006). A Methodology for assessing organizational Core Values. *Journal of Management Studies*. 43 (2) 175-201.

Van der Wal, D. (2004). HRM moet rol opeisen bij bepalen van kernwaarden [HRM should claim its role in the establishment of core values]. *Gids voor personeelsmanagement.* 12 , 32-35.

Van der Wal, Z. (2006). Kernwaarden in openbaar bestuur en bedijfsleven: overzicht van meest genoemde organisatiewaarden in bestuurskundige en bedrijfskundige literatuur, gedragscodes en onderzoek [Core values in public administration and trade and industry: an overview of the top organizational values in management and business literature, rules of conduct and research.]. *Beleidswetenschap.* 2, 48-63.

Verbiest, E. (2000). *De schoolleider als leraar: de kern van onderwijskundig leiderschap. [The school manager as a teacher: the core of educational leadership].* Alphen aan de Rijn: Samsom.

Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.

Websites:

Everts, A. G. A. & Trompenaars, A. F. (2006). *Cultuur en de gezonde organisatie [Culture and the healthy organization]*. Retrieved October 24, 2007, from http://www.thtconsulting.com/Content/cont051a.htm.

Van der Loo, H. (October 14th, 2007). *Tobben met organisatiewaarden [Bothering about organizational values]*. Retrieved October 24, 2007 from http://www.managementauteursblog.nl/2007/10/14/tobben-met-organisatiewaarden.

Appendix

Table 2: The participating organizations

Sector of Industry	Number of employees	Interviewee(s)
Construction	4600 worldwide	Corporate Communication Manager
Pharmaceutical branch	20	Head of Communication
Construction	80	Marketing Manager & Head of Human Resources
Supermarket holding	200,000 worldwide	Brand Manager
Education	3000	Head of Communication
Provision of services	100 Benelux	Program Manager
Technical industry	33,000 worldwide	Manager HR & Communications
Provision of services	100	Coordinator Promotion and Culture
Health service	180	Communication Manager
Education	6500	Corporate Communication Manager
Health service	1500	Secretary Board of Directors
Design	300	Marketing Manager & Coordinator Project Studios
Technical Industry	475,000 worldwide	Head of Marketing & Director Corporate Communications
Publisher	18,400 worldwide	Communication Manager
Energy industry	1500 worldwide	Communication Manager