**Reclaiming Our Values**

**Introduction**

Civil society, and indeed the public sector, prides itself on its values. Community and voluntary organisations form out of citizen concerns that are motivated by a shared value base. The foundation stones of these organisations rest on these values. These are values that look beyond the self and are rooted in a concern for human dignity, inclusion and social justice. Board members, staff and volunteers across these organisations are fired up and exercised by these values. They are champions for these values in seeking a society, a politics, and a state characterised by these values.

However, we confront a crisis of values in civil society, a crisis that undermines the goals, work and potential of our organisations. Our values have, all too often, ended up carefully filed away in strategic plans. We assume they remain strong and at play but we never check they are still shared internally, their definitions remain agreed, and that they are actually evident in the outputs and outcomes from our work.

Our values have come under threat. Funder demands underpin a new pride of place for values of a more managerial nature, related to efficiency, effectiveness and value for money. These are values that are repeatedly engaged by the demands of funder bureaucracy. Economic crisis and funding cutbacks brought survival to the top of our agenda and with it attendant security related values. We make our case for social change in the language and values of the powerful rather than rooting our arguments in the emotional, in what we believe is right.

**Values**

Values are those ideals we deem to be important. They motivate. Personal values shape our attitudes, our choices, and or behaviours. This can be unconsciously or consciously. Each of us holds a system of values and at any one time there are those values that get priority. The values that are engaged repeatedly, like muscles, are the ones that get prioritised. They can be engaged by such as public debate, media, our organisations, political discourse, advertising and tradition.

Values are important for organisations. In any organisation a dominant value set will define the purpose, priorities, processes and practices in that organisation. This can be implicit or explicit. We can track back from the outputs and outcomes of an organisation to the patterns of behaviour at play within the organisation, to the procedures and systems that govern this behaviour, and ultimately to the values that shape these procedures and systems.

**Equality and Human Rights Values**

Our search for a more equal, inclusive and just society is motivated by values. A core set of values can be identified that motivate a concern for equality and human rights. These include values of:

* Dignity with its focus on respect, human worth and relationships of love, care and solidarity.
* Autonomy with its focus on choice and the freedom and capacity to make real choices.
* Inclusion with its focus on belonging and community and the importance of recognising and adjusting for diversity.
* Participation with its focus on empowerment and having a say.
* Social justice with its focus on the distribution of resources, power and status.

**Approaches to Social Change**

In our pursuit of social change, we fail to attend to values and the power of values. We prioritise an engagement with the powerful. We assert and seek to exercise rights as minimum standards. We make the business case for organisations to change their systems and bring forward the evidence for policy change. These are all useful strategies but there remains a failure to engage on a key battleground for social change, the cultural battleground. That would involve us in a concern for values as a driver for social change.

Values-led approaches to social change would have us engage with people generally rather than just the powerful. The challenge would be to engage people with our values of inclusion, participation, social justice. This is not to convince but to remind. Everybody holds these values but not everybody accords a priority to them. The focus in our work would be a demand for values-led institutions and for values informed policies and policy making processes.

Values led organisations are explicit in naming and defining their values. They are coherent in applying their values in all areas of their work. They are consistent in applying their values in all contexts and at all times. Values are the lens through which they plan and prioritise, they make decisions, communicate and design and deliver services.

**Implications**

The starting point for reclaiming our values has to be within our own organisations. We need to re-build our organisations as values-led. This means being explicit about our core values, such as dignity, autonomy, participation, inclusion and social justice. We could audit our organisations and the outputs and outcomes we produce to establish the values that are dominant in our organisation. We need to develop a values-proposition for our organisation that:

* Names and defines our core values.
* Establishes the direction suggested for our organisation by each of these core values in a statement of purpose.
* Establishes the approach to our work suggested for our organisation by each of these core values in a statement of process.
* Establishes the behaviour suggested for our Board, staff and volunteers by each of these core values in a statement of practice.

We should generate and sustain an internal dialogue that reminds of and engages everyone in the organisation with our core values. Then we use the values proposition as the template to assess plans developed, decisions made, services provided, advocacy pursued, and communication.

Our next focus has to be the tools we deploy in search of social change. The first step is engagement in the cultural battle over values that is progressing. In our communications and our public actions, we need to engage people with our core values. To do this effectively we will have to network and build shared agendas with our allies in this work of engaging core values. It is only in this way that a critical mass can be achieved. Then we need to take on and challenge those who would engage opposing values whether in political discourse, the media, advertising, and public spaces.

The second step is promotion and support of values-led organisations in all sectors that we seek to influence. The public sector equality and human rights duty, in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, provides a valuable lever in this regard. This requires public bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect human rights for staff and service-users across all their functions. An effective way to implement this duty is for a public body to establish their core equality and human rights values and to put in place the organisational systems to live out these values in all their functions – to become values-led in a manner that includes some priority for these values that find a place with some ease in the public sector.

**Conclusion**

Values and the pursuit of values-led approaches to social change offer innovation at a time when we need to do things differently if we are to make progress in creating the society we aspire to. Values-led approaches lend power to what we do in touching on the emotional and engaging with the very factors that motivate people in their attitudes, choices and behaviours. They are respectful in acknowledging people already hold such values but need engaging to give some priority to them. It is time to engage in the cultural battle and take a leadership in this as values-led organisations.

**Niall Crowley, Values Lab**

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