

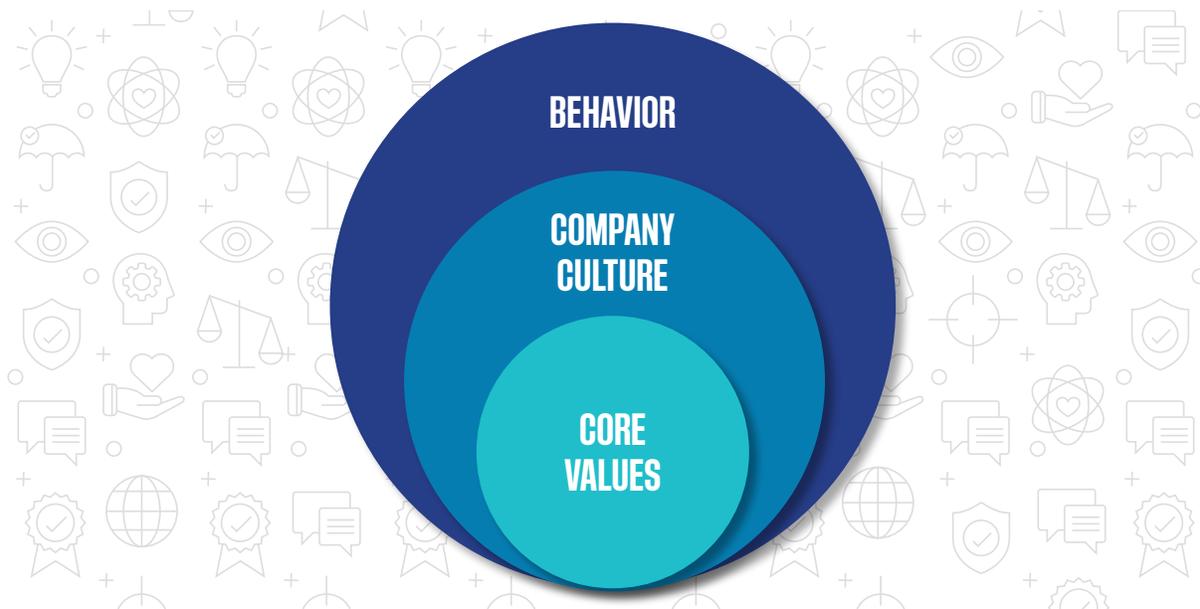


# Finding your MUSE:

## Creating core values that actually inspire employees

With COVID-19 shaking businesses across the world, the importance of corporate values has never been more evident. This crisis has stoked a palpable emotional response from employees, and leaning into a strong set of core values has helped some companies create a sense of comfort and familiarity during these uncertain times. Strong core values have also helped companies increase resiliency by maintaining culture during the sudden shift to remote work and guiding leaders as they navigate difficult decision-making.

While this crisis has certainly reinforced the importance of core values, their role as **cultural cornerstones** and a company's **internal compass** withstands regardless of a global pandemic. Core values articulate what makes a company's culture unique and special while uniting and inspiring employees around deeply ingrained principles they agree to be most important. Just as our personal values motivate our beliefs and behaviors, core values guide action and decision-making as employees carry out the company's mission and vision.



Core values serve as the bedrock of a **company's culture** — but only if employees believe them to be the organization's authentic driving principles. If employees do not agree with and stand for the company's stated values, those values are nothing more than words. Moreover, a discrepancy between stated values and the actions of leadership can breed a distrustful, cynical, and uninspired workforce. So before you slap a list of adjectives in your employee handbook, take a thoughtful, inside-out approach that taps into the heart of your company culture. **The key to developing core values that employees will actually embrace is uncovering shared values which already exist.**

## Values don't shape culture, they reflect it

A common pitfall companies make when defining their core values is thinking of them as precepts — beliefs and qualities employees are expected to adopt. In fact, only three percent of Americans describe their company's values as a form of 'self-governance' according to a study by the [Boston Research Group](#). That's because it's unlikely that a person will conform to a set of values that are inauthentic to themselves.

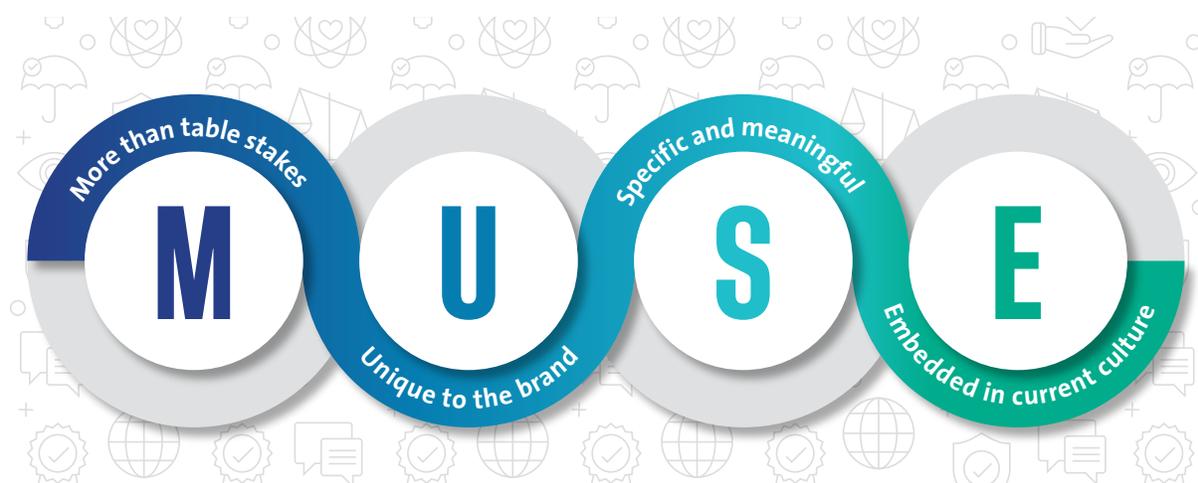
All companies possess values that have organically shaped culture over time, even if those have not been brought to the surface and formally articulated yet. Dictating which values you believe your employees should embody will have little to no effect if they contrast actual values that genuinely drive culture. If a company's culture has always been centered around teamwork and collaboration, for example, being told that "competition" is a core value won't change that. Employees are not guided by words and rhetoric, but the actions of their peers. While values can act as guardrails, they are ultimately what you do, not what you say.

Thinking about core values as existing guiding principles — instead of desired outcomes — is the first step in articulating values that will unite, inspire, and motivate employees. The next step is tapping into these authentic values.

## Values are your company's MUSE

Developing core values requires looking at your company culture critically to uncover the qualities, beliefs, and axioms that define the character of your workforce. A good place to start is by asking long-time, well-respected employees and leaders questions like: *What is special about working here? What qualities do most employees have in common? What kind of person thrives here?* These questions will reveal common characteristics that represent your workforce, as well as your employees' shared beliefs and motivational forces.

Once you have an idea of the omnipresent values that already exist in your company's culture, dig deeper to articulate a distinguishing set of values that align with our MUSE formula:



## MUSE More than table stakes

Universally embraced values such as honesty, respect, and integrity are not defining — they are inherently expected and obvious. Otherwise known as permission-to-play values, these principles represent the minimum actions and standards that are required in an organization. While these types of values should still be considered in the hiring process, they are not core values because they do not define the company’s distinct culture, and they do not inspire employees to go beyond minimum societal expectations.

## MUSE Unique to the brand

“Quality. Excellence. Integrity. Respect.” These generic values could easily belong to any company (they belong to Coca-Cola). Much like permission-to-play values, generic values are not inspiring or differentiating as they fail to answer the question: “*what is distinctly special about our culture and someone who works here?*” If you find yourself with a list of cookie-cutter values, try to hone in on the nuances of what these qualities mean specifically to your brand.



Just as different people have different personal values, your core values may not resonate with everyone. Some people might not be inspired by Zappo’s value “Create fun and a little weirdness,” or Patagonia’s value “Not bound by convention.” But this is what makes them a helpful tool in attracting the kind of person who thrives in your work environment.

## M U **S** E Specific and meaningful

While core values should be unique and distinct to a brand, they also must be easy to understand, remember, and apply in everyday work. Values should be considered choices employees make in any given circumstance. They can be straightforward like Atlassian's "Don't #@!% the customer" or inspiring like Buffer's "Cultivate positivity." Avoid vague and convoluted language as that is ineffective in guiding action — take Airbnb's "Be a cereal entrepreneur," for example. Similar to above, expand upon generic values to embody the true essence of your culture.



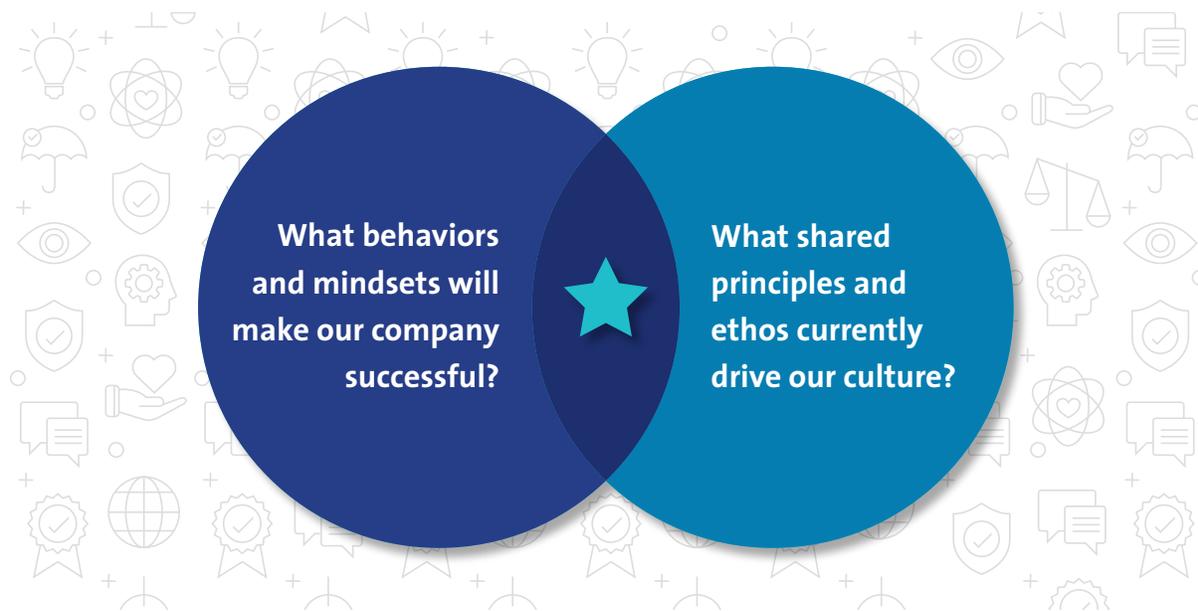
## M U **S** E **E**Embedded in current culture

Core values are not aspirational. They must reflect your company's current reality, not what you hope to someday be. For example, a company cannot claim "work-life balance" as a core value if employees are consistently working overtime, or "diversity" if their board consists of only men. Masquerading aspirational values as core values may sound nice to external audiences, but employees will recognize them as hollow and insincere.

# Values as a competitive advantage

From an internal perspective, core values are critical to inspiring employees, shaping culture, and guiding decision-making. But for external audiences, they may also express your competitive advantage by stating benefits your culture is uniquely poised to offer. For example, Zappos' value "Deliver WOW through service" embodies the company's primary competitive advantage — their commitment to excellent customer service — while simultaneously giving employees an increased sense of ownership for delivering this key benefit.

Defining the values that give your company a competitive edge requires taking a look at your existing values and vetting the ones that are essential to the long-term success of your company. This will help you pinpoint which characteristics, principles, and behaviors you must reinforce at the individual level in order to grow and succeed as a collective, whether that applies to operations, customer service, or products. Values that strengthen culture and drive success are ultimately the intersection of these two questions:



Fostering a culture where the resulting values are encouraged, incentivized, and celebrated will inspire employees to enhance these existing qualities within themselves. It will shine a light on employees' greatest strengths and allow them to do their best work, subsequently strengthening the type of culture that drives long-term success for your company, and your company alone.

# About thinkPARALLAX

We are a leading full-service ESG strategy and communications agency. Partnering with influential companies across industries, we drive meaningful sustainability progress, action, and conversation. Our team of expert strategists and creatives guide every stage of our clients' sustainability journey from ESG strategy to reporting, communications, and engagement, delivering compelling solutions that maximize business and stakeholder value.

**thinkPARALLAX**  
555 2nd St., #1  
Encinitas, CA 92024  
760.634.0273

**Jonathan Hanwit**  
Co-Founder  
jonathan@thinkparallax.com

    
@thinkparallax  
www.thinkparallax.com

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