

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT · NO. 1

What If Every Company Had to Publish Its Assumptions Instead of Its Values?

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Every company has a values statement. Almost nobody can recite it, including the people who wrote it.

The values hang in the lobby, or they sit on a page of the website that loads a little more slowly than the rest. Integrity. Innovation. Respect. Customer first. The words were chosen carefully, usually by a committee, usually over several weeks, and they describe a company that does not exist and never has. Everyone knows this. It is one of the few things everyone inside a company quietly agrees on.

Now imagine a different page. Same lobby, same website. But instead of its values, the company has to publish its assumptions. Not what it hopes to be. What it quietly believes. What had to be true for last year's decisions to look reasonable.

That page would be harder to write. It would also be the most honest document most companies have ever produced.

Values are chosen for how they sound. Assumptions are chosen by what survives.

Nobody votes on a company's assumptions. There is no workshop, no facilitator, no offsite where the leadership team agrees to believe something. Assumptions form the way paths form across a lawn: from repeated walking. They come out of the founder's habits, the last crisis, the biggest customer, the quarter that almost went wrong. They are the company's real constitution, and they are almost never written down, because writing them down was never anyone's job.

Values are the opposite. They are written first and lived later, if at all. They face outward. They are designed to be admired. This is why the values statement won and the assumptions page never existed: values are the affordable kind of honesty. They cost nothing, because they commit the company to nothing it can be held to. An assumption is not designed at all, which is exactly why it is more truthful. It does not describe the company anyone wants. It describes the company there is.

What the page would say

Imagine reading it. We assume growth will continue. We assume our best people will stay. We assume the customer will not read the terms. We assume this market will still make sense in ten years. We assume the new technology is a tool and not a replacement. We assume the founders' instincts will keep working at ten times the size.

Some of these assumptions are reasonable. Some are bets dressed up as facts. But notice: the page would not embarrass the company because the assumptions are foolish. It would embarrass the company because nobody can remember deciding them. They were never examined on their merits. They were absorbed, and then they began to decide things.

The gap is where the decisions happen

Every organization makes its real choices in the distance between what it says and what it assumes. The values say that people are the greatest asset. The assumption is that people are replaceable. Hiring, layoffs, promotions, and reorganizations all happen inside that gap. New employees learn the gap faster than they learn the values. They just learn not to mention it, because the values are the official story and the gap is not.

This is why so many decisions inside companies feel surprising only to outsiders. To the people inside, the decision followed directly from what everyone knew and no one said. The outsider was reading the values. The insider was reading the assumptions. Two people can sit in the same meeting and attend different companies, and the difference is which page they have read.

The page would date itself

There is a subtler effect. Assumptions expire. A belief that was reasonable when the company was small becomes a habit when the company is large, and a habit does not know it has stopped being true. A published page would carry a date, and the date would ask the question the hallway never asks: when did we last check this? Most strategic failure is not a wrong answer. It is a right answer kept long after the question changed. A page with dates on it would make the keeping visible.

The honesty companies already practice in private

Here is the curious part. Companies are capable of this honesty. They rehearse failure in private all the time. Before a big decision, a team will sit in a room and imagine the project has failed, then work backward to ask why. It is one of the most useful exercises in modern management, and it works precisely because, for an hour, the assumptions are allowed to speak. Then the meeting ends, the door opens, and the assumptions are sent back underground – because the exercise is private, and what is private does not have to be defended.

The experiment only asks why the honesty is rationed. If the assumptions are safe to examine in the conference room before the decision, why are they unspeakable on the website after it? The answer is not that the page would reveal weaknesses. Every competitor already knows the weaknesses. The page would reveal something more dangerous: that the company knows them too.

Why it will never happen voluntarily

An assumption stated aloud becomes examinable. As long as it stays implicit, it can be denied, softened, adjusted, or forgotten. The moment it is published, it becomes a claim, and claims can be checked. That is uncomfortable, and the discomfort is the point. Most institutions do not avoid honesty because they are dishonest. They avoid it because examined beliefs are expensive. They have to be defended, updated, or abandoned.

But consider what the page would change. Investor letters would read differently. Hiring conversations would become shorter and stranger. Customers would learn which companies assume their loyalty and which companies assume their skepticism. Boards would finally see the document they have actually been governing from. And competitors reading each other's pages would discover something almost funny: how many rival strategies rest on the same unexamined hope.

The question that stays

My Ph.D. research is about how situations get interpreted before judgment begins – how the reading of a situation quietly does most of the work that we later credit to the decision. The assumptions page is that idea made visible. Every consequential decision already rests on a page of assumptions. The page exists. It is simply written in invisible ink, distributed across hallway habits and budget cycles and the stories a company tells about its own past.

So the experiment does not really ask companies to publish anything. It asks something smaller, and harder. Pick any decision – yours, your team's, your company's – and ask what had to be believed for it to look reasonable. Write that down. Read it once, out loud, as if it were on the lobby wall.

What if it was?