Values-based Organizations: an introduction

Eduardo Missoni
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If you make a search on internet with the word "values-based organisations" you get some 3000 results; if you try with "ethical organisations" you get another 10,000 (try both with "s" and "z" in the word "organisation" to be sure you catch both the British and the American-english spelling!). Considering the dimension of the world wide web, I would say that those numbers are surprisingly low! But if you analyse your search you will discover that very often the "ethical" or "values-based" concept is used referring to the corporate sector and the need (or opportunity) for companies to become "socially responsible".

At Indaba-network we are interested in another type of "values-based organisations". We want to reflect about those organisations whose scope and aims are based on universal values and human rights, with a vision of a better world, one based on social justice and Peace.

We are especially interested in the future, therefore we want to especially to challenge youth and youth-related organisations.

This encompasses organisations very different in size, varying from small local associations, to international organisations, but all committed for the common good, dealing with issues such education, health, community development, environmental protection, promotion of intercultural dialogue, human rights, humanitarian efforts, and many others.

However, whatever their original "ethical framework", organisations have the tendency to become the channel through which particular interests are served, rather than the vehicle of the values they were intended to serve and promote. Taking distance from the ideal, movements originally moved by high values, often end up as prisoners of the organization. Particular interests, including those of groups and entities external to the organization, are attracted by the opportunities the organization may offer, or by some of its specific objectives, rather than in its wider goal and values.

Today's world needs organisations able to involve youth, to offer them ideals, tools and opportunities that empower them individually and collectively to challenge authoritarianism, nationalism, chauvinism and corruption. At all levels, these organizations should practice values and attitudes such as honesty, solidarity, democracy and active participation in decision-making, critical thinking, volunteering, respect for diversity and promotion of equal opportunities, environmental consciousness. Furthermore, today's organizations need to react to increasingly fast and complex societal changes. This poses serious governance problems to many values-based organizations, which may respond adapting to mainstream tendencies and pressures, rather than re-proposing their original values and developing new approaches without giving up those principles. Issues of legitimacy, independence, accountability, internal democracy, representation, transparency, are common to many of those organizations, and their bodies at various levels. With an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, values-based organizations need to rethink their positioning, governance and structures, if they want to remain relevant and play a role in shaping the future of today's world.

From this pages, we will explore together the challenge that ethics represents for values-based organisations and their members, managers and leaders. The idea is to widely share our thoughts and experiences, with the purpose to ensure that our values-based organisations remain loyal to their ideals and really contribute to a better world.