

It's a Matter of Trust

The founder of the Great Place to Work Institute uncovers the key to building corporate culture



By Graham Lowe

HR PROFESSIONALS IN my workshops often say they don't want to be known solely as the "keepers of corporate culture." Their ideal organization is one in which the executive team actively nurtures a people-centred environment. While it's obvious a positive workplace is important for a business's success, it's difficult to be strategic about culture when it remains a soft concept rather than a clear guide to action.

That's why trust is such a powerful tool. Extensive survey evidence shows that trust-based relationships directly influence the two key components of employee engagement: job satisfaction and commitment. The level of employee trust in management also affects organizational performance. A recent study of more than 5,000 health-care workers in Alberta, for example, showed that employees who trusted senior management were far more likely to develop and apply their

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skills, be team players and learn from their mistakes. What better way to unleash employees' potential than to trust them to do a good job?

The Great Place to Work Institute, a workplace consulting firm, developed a trust-based model of great workplaces that defines trust-building leadership behaviour. The model is employee driven, based on extensive employee interviews that Robert Levering (institute co-founder) and Milton Moskowitz conducted for their 1984 book, *100 Best Companies to Work for in America*. Companies at the top of this year's lists include 3M Germany, Bain & Company (U.K.), Genentech (U.S.), Analytical Graphics (U.S.) and Vancity Credit Union (Canada).

What these and other great workplaces share is leadership behaviour that is credible, respectful and fair in the eyes of employees. These pillars of trust foster employee pride and team performance. Effective trustworthy leadership behaviour includes the following features, practiced in combination:

- Open communication
- Accessibility
- Consistent Mission Statements
- Employees' professional development

- Collaborates with employees on decisions
- Impartial hiring and promotion practices
- Cares for employees
- A fair work environment

The result in workplaces whose leaders practice these behaviours is improved performance. Between 84 and 89 per cent of employees in the top 10 organizations on the Institute's recent best workplaces lists in North America, Europe, Mexico and India, look forward to coming to work. Case studies of organizations on the 2006 *Canadian Business* list of Best Workplaces in Canada reveal that employees feel inspired and empowered to contribute their best to customers or clients.

Vancity's tag line, "Expect Better," was created by its staff. One of the goals of telling the Vancity story was to recognize and share what makes that company unique. In other words, identify the pulse of its internal culture and source of its customer loyalty.

The leaders at Saint Elizabeth Health Care, based in Markham, Ont., set the bar very high for themselves. They wanted to be viewed by their employees as an "amazing place to work." This goal required a focus on development and utilization of their talent. With home-care nurses working in many communities, Saint Elizabeth has equipped front-line providers with the latest technology to improve communication, diagnosis and service delivery—and to make workloads more manageable. So for Saint Elizabeth, service quality and a great workplace are mutually reinforcing.

Urban Systems, a mid-sized engineering consulting firm based in Western Canada, has ongoing "conversations about culture." Its employees use regularly scheduled meetings and other planned events to explore features of the company's culture. Each event has a theme, such as "conversations about culture," to galvanize discussions. The conversations are all-inclusive, with the senior partners actively participating as well.

For HR professionals, the challenge to developing a people-centred work environment is helping the executive team understand the strategic value of employee trust. It's crucial to help leaders see that in a healthy organization, trust flourishes in all relationships: with customers, shareholders, business partners and employees. ♻️

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