

TRUST IS TOPS

How you can build a better workplace culture

BY GRAHAM LOWE



More and more executives are equating corporate culture with business success. In fact, the once fuzzy notion is gaining a strategic edge.

At a minimum, an organization's culture—"the way we do things here"—must promote core values and ethical standards.

But a vibrant workplace culture can do much more, forging a strong link between people and performance. This happens when culture comes alive in the relationships that bind employees with each other, with their managers and with customers.

A positive culture energizes employees to excel in their jobs and supports them to meet their personal needs and goals. With a talent crunch upon us, the quality of the culture an organization builds will either be a competitive advantage or disadvantage. Research by the Great Place to Work Institute, a global workplace consulting firm that compiles best-workplaces lists in 29 countries, shows

that *trust* is the bedrock of a positive organizational culture. A high-trust culture defines great workplaces, regardless of an organization's size, sector or country. Employees trust managers who are concerned about their well-being, listen and respond to their input, are open and honest about change, and consistently act the organization's values. Trustworthy managers also help instil in employees a sense of pride in their work and a true sense of camaraderie.

Employees must be more than engaged. They must be inspired

This powerful combination of trust, pride and camaraderie inspires employees to be creative, innovative, and to take risks—in short, to operate like business owners. That has a powerful impact on performance. Independent analysis shows that publicly traded companies on

Fortune's list of 100 Best Companies To Work For in the U.S. and the *Financial Times'* list of best workplaces in the U.K., both compiled by the Great Place to Work Institute, consistently outperform their peers financially.

So it is not surprising that 78% of the employees on the *Canadian Business* inaugural list of the Best Workplaces in

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Canada indicate they regularly look forward to coming to work every day. And that trend is not exclusive to Canadian organizations. The Great Place to Work Institute reports similar findings in all of its lists published around the world. Employees at these leading workplaces are more than engaged; they are truly inspired by their jobs, their co-workers, and their company. In contrast, the average Canadian employer is lucky to have one-third of its workers feeling so inspired, according to a recent survey by EKOS Research Associates Inc. and the Graham Lowe Group.

Closing the inspiration gap often requires a shift in how senior managers think about their people. In great workplaces, leaders view their organization's culture through a strategic lens. Consider how managers in diverse organizations across Canada and the U.S. have built cultures that are both people-focused *and* high-performance. Vancity's growth into Canada's largest credit union is the fulfillment of its values and commitments, one of which is to ensure that it is a truly great place to work. At Urban Systems, a Canadian engineering and urban-planning consulting firm, the philosophy is "happy staff means happy clients," a belief reinforced by company-wide conversations about how to live each of the firm's core values. Leaders at Baptist Health Care, in Pensacola, Fla., recognized that culture can either drive or drag strategy, and proceeded to create a culture that equally values patients and staff.

Another lesson from great workplaces is the steps leaders take to ensure that *all* employees are involved in continuously reinforcing what's distinctive about the culture. For example, new recruits at Hilti Canada receive intensive training on the multinational construction-equipment-maker's distinctive culture, which emphasizes the importance of worthwhile work, being in control of achieving your goals, and celebrating others' successes.

In all these organizations, business metrics are linked to the goal of creating and sustaining a positive, unique and trust-based culture. But metrics don't give the full picture. When a CFO sees dozens of anonymous comments from an employee survey saying, "I love working at this place," the people strategy comes alive. In the past year, CEOs at a number of organizations associated with the Great Place to Work Institute mobilized cultural change by committing to make all their workplaces "great by 2008." That's a stretch goal, but the journey is what matters. Here are five principles that can help managers get there:

1 DETERMINE WHERE YOUR ORGANIZATION is on the trust continuum. Is it relatively easy to have open conversations about how business decisions affect employee trust, or is trust simply not talked about at the executive table?

2 MANAGERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND that every interaction is an opportunity to build trust, and that missteps can quickly break trust.

3 FOCUS ON A FEW KEY TRUST-BUILDING CHANGES and pursue these consistently and relentlessly, recognizing that transforming a culture is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

ARE YOU CUTTING IT?

A manager's checklist for creating a high-trust culture that instils pride and builds camaraderie

ACTIONS ON CREDIBILITY

- How visible are you with your staff?
- Do managers' behaviours match their words? Do they keep their promises?
- How effective is the two-way communication?

ACTIONS ON RESPECT

- Do you view someone as an "employee" or as a whole person?
- How collaborative is decision-making?
- Have you put the right people in the right jobs and given them the resources to be highly effective?

ACTIONS ON FAIRNESS

- How consistent is the distribution of benefits and perks?
- Are promotion processes widely understood and consistently followed?
- What can employees do when they need to appeal a decision?

ACTIONS ON PRIDE

- Have you defined what you want your employee experience to be?
- Would you recommend your company as an employer to your close friends?
- How have you connected an employee's job to a tangible outcome?

ACTIONS ON CAMARADERIE


- How do teams and supervisors welcome new employees to the company?
- How much fun is it to work here?
- Are you better at task accomplishment than relationship building?
- How are employees involved in the community?

SOURCE: GREAT PLACE TO WORK INSTITUTE

4 UNDERSTAND THAT HOW you actually carry out changes to improve the work environment—*especially* by involving employees in the process—is more important than what the changes are.

5 LEVERAGE WHAT'S ALREADY SPECIAL, encouraging employees to communicate and celebrate the unique strengths of the culture that energize them to contribute their best.

Implementing these action principles requires senior managers to reach out to employees. That may push their comfort levels. But this small risk is well worth taking, and will pay off in improved employee commitment. One of the practices that distinguishes organizations on the Great Place to Work Institute's best workplaces lists from their peers, in Canada and elsewhere, is a relentless focus on active communication with employees through multiple channels: town-hall meetings, focus groups, surveys and, perhaps most important, face-to-face interactions between senior managers and workers on the front lines.

This year, look for your future competitive advantage in your workplace culture. Start by finding the biggest levers you can put your hands on to increase trust. Just ask your employees—they can help point the way. 

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