Three Keys to a Winning Culture

Creating a thriving, positive work environment may not be as complicated as you think.

Not long ago I was asked to keynote an event on the topic of building the right culture in a manufacturing company. Beginning with the premise that a company's team members are the best judges of a robust and successful culture, I settled down on the couch with my laptop and proceeded to view profiles of companies selected as Top Workplaces.

Top Workplaces was the brainchild of the people at WorkplaceDynamics, who according to their website began the program with the simple assumption that "the most successful companies are the ones that employees believe in." Each year, partnering with 30 major publishers across the U.S., Top Workplaces ranks companies—either nominated by their employees or by the company directly—based on the ratings given to them by their employees.

One such publisher, and my hometown newspaper, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, selected 150 local organizations for inclusion on its list of the Top Workplaces in 2015.

Again, seeking material for my keynote on company culture, I began skipping from company profile to company profile in search of what employees who love where they work truly value in an employer. Each profile included a minimum of three comments made by the employer's team members in reference to the company for which they work and my hope was that the process of reviewing them might lead me to 10 or 15 items that these organizations had in common. The result astounded me.

Not only were there *not* 15 items common among these companies, there weren't even 10. There weren't even five! Almost without exception, the comments made by the employees of Top Workplaces fell into just three categories.

> **Creating an environment where people love their coworkers requires a willingness to part ways with employees who drag the others down.**

When the time came to deliver my keynote, rather than droning on in boring fashion about what I had found, I reviewed a series of 30 quotes, pulled somewhat randomly from company profiles, and invited the audience to draw their own conclusions as to what the three categories were. They nailed it. While space prevents the inclusion of all 30 quotes herein, consider these:

"I work with great people for great clients."

"The people are true professionals."

"Entrepreneurial freedom."

"I have the right mix of freedom, opportunity and challenge."

"I love my job because of the great people who work here."

"I feel like a valued contributor who is treated with respect."

"I feel that I am valued and appreciated. I can go to my manager at any time with a concern or problem and I feel that I am heard."

"My opinions count. Everyone is treated with dignity and respect. I feel comfortable talking with anyone within the organization."

"I am treated with respect. My opinions count. My suggestions are considered. The work is interesting. The people are great."

MATTHEW KIRCHNER, CEO
American Finishing Resources, LLC
mkirchner@afrnow.com

"We have very talented people here who do great things for our clients."

"I get to find creative solutions to solve organizational issues."

"I feel that my voice is heard, my ideas are appreciated and that I make a difference in the company."

"It gives me freedom to balance my personal life with my work life, while also working with people I enjoy being around."

"I am given independence to manage my own daily work, but my manager is accessible when I have questions."

"I feel I have freedom to pursue what interests me within the company, and my manager will help foster my personal growth and development."

"I love my job because I feel as though management values my work."

"I love the people I work with."

"I love working with my coworkers. We are a family here."

"I'm allowed to be myself, manage my work, manage my life and do my very best at my job and feel good about it."

Before reading on, read them again. Ask yourself into which three categories these quotes, representative of hundreds I reviewed, fall.

If you are like me, and like my audience, your answers were something akin to "people," "respect" and "freedom."

Could it be that creating a winning culture, where employees love to work and excel, comes down to these three factors? After hosting several discussions on the topic with business and thought leaders, I believe the answer is clearly yes, so much so that I have coined the term "People, Respect, Freedom" as an easy tool to

remember what it takes to build a winning culture. Let us consider each.

People

Perusing the comments made by the employees it is clear that People are a key factor, but not in the way one might think. The people employees work for is not so important. Rather, what is essential to a solid culture is who the employees work with. As one of my colleagues put it, "if you go to work every day and there's some jerk there waiting for you when you get there, you're not going to be happy going to work." Another pointed out that, as harsh as it sounds, creating an environment where people love their coworkers requires a willingness to part ways with employees who drag the others down.

Respect

First, employees need to feel that they have a voice in the way business is conducted. Not just a worthless "my door is always open" platitude from company leadership, but a sincere interest on the part of those responsible for leading the organization in the ideas, opinions and concerns of team members, and a willingness to take action when necessary. Second, they must feel that their work and effort is genuinely valued.

Freedom

Team members want the independence to manage their daily work, to find creative solutions on their own, to pursue opportunities that interest them and to be themselves without being asked or forced to act in a way that is inconsistent with their individual personality.

From the mouths of the employees of the nation's top work places: People, Respect, Freedom a simple recipe for building a winning culture. ◢◢◢