

Recipe for Success

Cooking Up a Winning Culture

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

It happens all the time. Someone passes along a recipe – their grandmother’s famous cake, a friend’s delicious casserole – that, under the watchful eyes of the new cook, turns out differently than the original. Maybe there’s an extra pinch of salt or just a bit more sugar than the instructions called for. It looks different. It tastes different.

Building a workplace culture works somewhat the same way: Employers set out to accomplish the same goal – company and individual achievement – but their businesses can flourish or flounder depending on what they add to the mix and how they personalize their “ingredients.”

We gathered a panel affiliated with the 2012 Best Places to Work in Indiana program to discuss what it takes to earn success and a spot on the list.

Participants:

Peter Burke – president and co-founder of Best Companies Group, based in Harrisburg, PA

Chris Olson – chief operations and HR officer of Blue & Co., Carmel

Jeff Peters – executive vice president of Wessler Engineering, Indianapolis

Melissa Proffitt Reese – partner at Ice Miller, LLP, Indianapolis

Hoosier flavor

Best Companies Group manages outstanding workplace programs in 21 states. Burke notes that Indiana is leading the pack when it comes to employee engagement.

“On average this year, 94% of the employees of the winning companies (see page 55 chart) are considered engaged with their employer,” he remarks. “Ninety-four percent is unbelievably high, and it’s one of the higher numbers that we’ve seen around the country.”

Blue & Co., a regional CPA firm based in Carmel, employs 300 people throughout its eight offices in Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio. It has also earned the Best Places to Work distinction for its Kentucky and Ohio operations.

The company didn’t make the Indiana list the first time it participated, but tried again two years later after implementing feedback from the Best Places report and an internal follow-up survey. A critical piece of the initiative was sharing results with all employees. The efforts paid off. For the past four years, Blue & Co. has been named a Best Place to Work.

“We’ve used that (Best Places) survey every year since to kind of benchmark,” Olson reports. “Are we making progress in the areas that we feel are most important? Are there new concerns or new issues that have cropped up since the last time that we need to pay attention to?”

“It’s very, very helpful; it really gives you a good idea of what the tone is and what people are thinking.”

“Don’t assume you know what’s going on in your organization,” Burke cautions. “Find out what your employees are thinking.”

Ice Miller has been a past honoree and the firm’s attorneys work closely with clients in an advisory role. “It isn’t that every idea or thought that’s put out there is one that the company needs to embrace, but employees need to feel like they have a voice, and that they’re being considered, whether it happens at a supervisory level or at the top level from the CEO down,” Proffitt Reese emphasizes.

Wessler Engineering participated in the program for the first time this year. Established in 1975, the company specializes in the “wet side of engineering,” which revolves around drinking water, sanitary wastewater and stormwater issues. It has approximately 60 employees.

Peters credits much of the firm’s success to an “employees come first” philosophy.

“We have a very simple formula for what we think (contributes to) our success as a firm: Our employee is No. 1, our client is No. 2 and then the business is No. 3. We feel that by placing the

employee at the top of that pyramid, if employees are happy, they're going to do good work, they're going to take care of the client's needs and they're going to have fun doing it."

Sweetening the deal

"I think one of the biggest misconceptions about being a Best Place to Work – or even just having a high level of employee engagement – is that how to get there is the same for every company," Burke contends.

"I think you need to look at your own organization: What is it that you strive for? Let's get the consistency of our message. Let's get our communication under control, but in the long run, let's make sure we're hiring the right people."

Proffitt Reese agrees.

"In my opinion, each industry has its own personality," she reflects. "The manufacturing industry is completely different from colleges and universities, which is very different from agriculture, which is very different from the chemical industry. And then you get to the individual companies that, without question, have their own personality, their own culture.

"You can really maintain that culture by a strong leader who has a good handle on what the culture is and then leads by example."

Burke observes that scores related to benefits such as tuition reimbursement and providing on-site snacks dropped this year in the Indiana survey, while rankings in various engagement and satisfaction categories increased significantly.

"I think companies are zoning in on some of the less traditional things and placing their efforts, energies or resources on other things that might be more specifically beneficial for their company," he comments. "I've heard it several times before that companies are saying, 'I don't want to offer what is sort of the trend or what everybody else is offering. I want to offer what our workplace needs.'"

Measuring up

Small businesses may not be able to "keep up with the Joneses" – aka large employers – when it comes to offering certain perks and benefits. The latter, on the other hand, may take longer to implement new programs due to their size.

"I think that smaller organizations have the ability to be a little more nimble, to perhaps be a little more creative and maybe a little more personal even in their approach as opposed to a much larger organization where you're trying to move a bigger ship," Olson remarks.

"But I don't think that is an excuse or any reason why a large company can't have the kind of culture that they want to develop if they put their mind to it. It can be done. You just have to work at it, just like a small organization does."

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*Melissa Proffitt Reese
Ice Miller, LLP*

Burke points out, however, that impacting change is a slippery slope at small organizations.

"While it's likely a little bit easier to implement some things that will impact employee engagement, a false step can have you back where you started very, very quickly, so it's sort of a double-edged sword there."

Proffitt Reese notes that there are inexpensive ways to remain competitive. A simple thank you, for instance, means a lot.

"I think it's incredibly important to do whatever you can

to acknowledge employees – long-term employees, people that went out of their way to do something pretty fundamentally important either for the company or for the community, acknowledging individual achievements in a way that makes the person feel appreciated and valued," she maintains. "Those take time and a little bit of thought, but not necessarily a lot of money."

Wessler expresses staff appreciation by closing its office on Friday afternoons during the summer and giving employees a head start on their weekends.

Another way to give back to employees is to promote personal and professional development.

Blue & Co. helps associates earn their continuing professional education credits and focuses on "soft skills" (management, leadership, networking and business development).

"It's a way to show individual employees that we're investing in them, that we want them to be successful long term, whether it's with our firm or somewhere else. But truly, we're willing to back them and help them to be successful along their path," Olson explains.

Wessler encourages employees to join professional organizations and to explore volunteer opportunities. They can donate up to 24 hours a year to a charity of their choice, with the company paying for the first 12 hours.

Taste of technology

When it comes to technology use outside the office, it's critical to strike the right balance.

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Blue & Co.*

you're setting in the organization – that vacation time and your personal time should be exactly that,” Olson states. “The technology tools are a wonderful benefit and a really valuable tool to be able to provide flexibility in managing your schedule and getting your work done, but then know when to walk away and turn it off and claim your personal time as your own.”

Proffitt Reese seconds that, and describes technology as both “friend and foe.”

She notes that things like texting, e-mail and cell phones make it easy for clients to reach her at any time, which brings an obligation to remain accessible and provide the best service. In addition, the tools help companies build cultures, especially when there are multiple locations. Individuals’ inability, however, to completely “tune out” can take its toll.

“It takes a tremendous amount of discipline, and I also think it comes from the top down. If you have a CEO that is constantly ‘on’ 24/7, all the time, and that’s what they’re demonstrating, then I think it is a little bit harder sometimes for the people that work at least directly underneath that individual to not feel that same compulsion.

“I think this is going to continue to be a real challenge for employers,” she continues. “I think it is very unhealthy in the long run for people to not be able to completely disconnect.”

A lack of “face time” in the office – even if employees are working remotely – can create the misconception that they’re not working hard enough.

“I think some senior managers and supervisors still conclude that if you’re not in the office, you’re not working,” Burke observes. “The supervisor (who’s thinking), ‘Oh, my gosh. The clock watcher leaves at 5:00 every night,’ doesn’t realize that between 10 and 11 at night, it’s e-mails, it’s preparing for the next day because they have the technology to log into the servers and do all of that.

“I think that’s a real stumbling block for a lot of supervisors and managers, and I think there’s education that needs to happen there.”

Peters says that it’s relatively easy to determine whether or not Wessler employees are contributing as they should be.

“For the most part, we don’t really monitor the clock for them. We can typically tell when an employee’s work is getting done or when it isn’t getting done. ... I think that if you’re a supervisor paying attention or a manager paying attention to the workflow underneath you, those things are fairly self-evident,” he asserts.

Some organizations are shifting away from a 40-hour workweek to an outcomes-based model of evaluation. Panelists suggest that the viability of that approach depends upon the individual’s position and responsibilities.

“When you look at someone doing their (own) job, I can see that completely working. But when you’re looking at individuals competing to move up the chain of authority and command and responsibility, I’ll be interested to see if that kind of a mechanism works,” Proffitt Reese contends.

Olson offers, “I think there’s certainly something to be said for the value of visibility, and it’s a little bit more difficult to get that visibility if you work 40%, 50%, 60% from home or out of the office. I think as you move into the ranks of supervisor and manager, where now you’re not only responsible for your own work product but now are directing the efforts of a team and of others, that takes being in the office and having (personal) interactions.”

Turning up the heat

Bridging the generation gap between Millennials and Baby Boomers is a growing priority for employers. As the latter prepares for retirement, many companies (but not enough) are finding ways to transfer their knowledge to incoming workers.

“I think that it is really important to be positive about this diversity, embrace it, educate people within the organization and then have a leader that really just sets a great example of why this is a really, really good thing,” Proffitt Reese declares. “It’s all about playing

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to everybody's strengths."

Burke insists, "It's getting to know what motivates. Companies are getting much, much better at that, but it is a challenge. If you're really stubborn and you don't want to have to deal with it, you're going to find yourself in trouble, especially as that group (Millennials) becomes more prevalent in the workplace."

Peters believes that it's crucial to personalize supervision.

"I think you have to manage diversity in general," he relates. "I think you have to really tailor your management style to embrace that. If you don't – it's not one size fits all – you'll leave somebody behind."

Olson poses the following scenario: "If you can have Baby Boomers who can model that work ethic and that desire to succeed, but then also let the younger (employees) – the Gen X, the Gen Y – leverage their knowledge of social media in order to develop a great communication or a great recruiting strategy for young people, then why would you not take advantage of those strengths and those opportunities?"

Another element of change deals with business growth, a positive development that can nonetheless pose challenges in maintaining an established workplace culture.

"I think what's interesting is when the smaller organizations start to get to bigger sizes, and you add a location and you go from 50 employees to over 100 employees. Those are huge differences that if you're not equipped to deal with it, what you found sort of easy to manage one day is now, 'Whoa, what do I do now?' because it's completely different," Burke reflects.

Peters says that Wessler Engineering keeps the firm's family environment in mind when considering expansion. Since he joined the company 10 years ago, it has grown from 20 employees to 60.

"Someday, we think we'd like to be maybe a 100-, 150-employee firm, but we recognize that as we get there and as we're heading in that direction, we've got to structure our organization where we can communicate and be effective as a firm of that size, but still maintain the atmosphere of the family firm because we feel that's one of the attributes that makes us a great place to work."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Peter Burke, Best Companies Group, at www.bestcompaniesgroup.com

Chris Olson, Blue & Co., at www.blueandco.com

Jeff Peters, Wessler Engineering, at www.wesslerengineering.com

Melissa Proffitt Reese, Ice Miller, LLP, at www.icemiller.com

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