

By Symone C. Skrzycki

# OWNING IT

## Controlling Your 'Best Places' Destiny

It's 5 p.m. and you're at the airport with barely enough time to make your flight. A quick cup of coffee sounds so appealing. You make the stop.

One more scenario.

You're driving on a deserted highway approaching a red light. No one's around. You could easily speed through it. You hit the gas pedal.

In the workplace, some employers take a similarly cavalier approach to employee satisfaction – thinking short term and leaving the outcome to chance. It's a strategy (or lack thereof) that can deplete morale, tarnish reputations and damage bottom lines.

Among those that don't exercise this approach: the 2019 Best Places to Work in Indiana.

So, what's the surefire strategy for becoming a Best Place to Work?

There's no such thing, asserts Peter Burke, president and co-founder of Best Companies Group. You have to customize based on what engages your employees.

"The motivators of employee engagement (throughout workplaces) are all different. A big misconception people have is that if you take the same formula and apply it in every organization, you'll get the same results. Not

the case. Understanding what your core values are and applying those, hiring and promoting accordingly – that's more along the lines of what's going to get you there."

That doesn't mean you can't learn from others' success.

A panel of honorees joined Burke ([www.bestcompaniesgroup.com](http://www.bestcompaniesgroup.com)) in sharing approaches and challenges in creating and maintaining a Best Places culture.

They include:

- John F. Gause, CEO and president, Apex Benefits (ninth year on list), [www.apexbg.com](http://www.apexbg.com)
- Chris Cason, president, Blue Horseshoe (fourth year on list), [www.bhsolutions.com](http://www.bhsolutions.com)
- Will O'Brien, president and founder, Ultimate Technologies Group (newcomer), [www.ultimatetechnologiesgroup.com](http://www.ultimatetechnologiesgroup.com)

### Benefits: Extra versus expected

Engagement is the key to a thriving culture. It's become increasingly difficult, however, for companies to stand out with perks (flexible schedules, health care benefits, social outings) they've implemented.

"All of these things that the Best Places to Work are doing ... now it's not like, 'Wow, this is great!' We're starting to evolve into, 'Well, why are you patting yourself on the back? That's what I expect when I'm interviewing in a lot of places,'" Burke stresses.

"That's probably the biggest challenge," Cason chimes in, "because it's always evolving and doing one thing well three years ago might not mark you as being unique as you move forward. As we strive to always be

unique in that, it's a continually moving target."

Since Best Companies Group began overseeing Best Places to Work programs 15 years ago (in Pennsylvania), Burke has observed a shift away from providing "stuff" to offering experiences.

"There's a lot of companies that give a lot of stuff and they have a checklist mentality," he notes. " 'Hey, if we do this, we can put a ping pong table in. If we have beanbag chairs and TVs in the cafeteria or breakfast room, that'll be great,' as opposed to, 'Hey, what kind of experiential thing can we do that people are going to remember?'"



"You have to keep trying to move that bar forward and improve because the second you are happy with where you're at, you're never going to improve as a company again."

– Chris Cason



“At the end of the day, you’ve got to make sure you’ve got buy-in from leadership – that they want to hear the good, the bad and they want to get better. That they’re going to listen and they’re going to do something.”

– John F. Gause

Blue Horseshoe, established in 2001, specializes in technical consulting, helping customers implement enterprise resource planning and supply chain software systems. Its 270 employees are divided among five Indianapolis locations, as well as sites in Denver; Charlotte; Columbus, Ohio; and Amsterdam.

“In each of our offices, we have a culture committee,” Cason discloses. “They’re given some resources – both financially and time-wise of things to do – and it’s their responsibility for their office to try and come up (with ideas). And continually push the boundaries of the things that they want to do to help make them unique.”

One initiative is Nerd Night For the Needy. Employees bring their gaming systems and food donations to an overnight shut-in.

“That’s something that wouldn’t have come up a couple years ago and now we’re running it for a second time,” Cason remarks. “Our employees help drive the direction of things like that and we try and continue to have the right platform to help them fulfill some of those goals.”

Ultimate Technologies Group focuses on commercial audio/visual technology, information technology infrastructure and building controls. The company, less than two years into its operations, has 35 employees.

O’Brien is passionate about employee engagement. Sometimes the obstacle, he maintains, is gaining executive buy-in.

“I do believe that the benefit that we get from engaged employees far outweighs the cost that goes into it. But the cost is always something I find myself explaining over and over again to new leaders in terms of, ‘Why do we do this or invest (our) money this way?’

Hopefully most of them see it eventually, but it may take a while to get there.”

Gause of Apex Benefits, an employee benefit consulting firm, concurs regarding survey participation: “At the end of the day, you’ve got to make sure you’ve got buy-in from leadership. That they want to hear the good, the bad and they want to get better. That they’re going to listen and they’re going to do something.”

### Spread the word

Apex, like many companies, shares survey results with staff. Gause cautions the importance of following through.

“That’s the thing you’ve got to be careful about if you’re going to do this – is to be able to report what you learn. Then, as the year goes on (continue the discussion about) what you’re doing to try to address those, because it’s all about getting better. Especially right now in this employee marketplace. It’s tough to recruit and it’s tough to retain. It’s (input generated by the survey) been really beneficial for us.”

Blue Horseshoe also conducts a separate anonymous employee survey.

“We’ve done that from the beginning,” Cason indicates. “When it came around to Best Places to Work ... it’s been a tremendous vehicle for us. They get surveyed twice but it’s almost completely different. We don’t replace one with the other. It’s really good to be able to get that feedback.

“The biggest thing you learn out of it is your weaknesses and how to go and attack those and what things you need to improve them. And as you grow, as you get bigger, not everybody else is having the same experience you are. Being able to measure that from across the entire company gives you a great benefit to see what people are seeing, not from the owner’s perspective but from an employee perspective.”

Gause seconds that, recalling when Apex first applied to the program nine years ago.

“At the time when we probably only had 15 employees, 20 employees – whatever the number was – not everybody knew everything that was going on in the company, which was surprising to me since I (did). I felt like everybody should know.”

In response, Apex started holding regular, company-wide meetings. Today, its team of 65 interacts through quarterly huddles and other gatherings.

At Blue Horseshoe, employees are often on the road and out of the office. An annual kickoff meeting, monthly town halls and lunches, and a weekly newsletter help connect them.

Cason mentions additional communications,

such as fireside chats, designed for smaller groups.

“We talk about the things that come out in the surveys,” he reveals. “We talk through what are the areas for improvement? What things can we do? It’s where we get a lot of ideas on some of the new types of benefits and things we want to try out. The changes we make to bonus plans and compensation (and) benefits all come through that.

“I would say because of all the traveling, communication, we find, is very necessary to make sure it’s a two-way street.”

### Hiring, holding onto talent

Earning a spot on the Best Places list is a powerful recruitment and retention tool.

“We’ve already hired somebody who came to us because they heard about the announcement,” reports O’Brien.

Cason agrees: “I’ve been shocked by people I will see at a career fair and they say, ‘Oh, I see you’ve been on the Best Places to Work (list).’ That’s actually something that causes somebody to come up and want to talk to you or be that differentiating factor.

“When you get into retention ... it’s all that you do to stay that way. It’s your philosophy that you want to be that company. At that point, it’s all the things they (employees) see that you try and do because you care about being a Best Places to Work. They no longer look for the external thing; it’s what they live and whether they truly believe it from there.”

Flexibility is paramount. Consider the changing mentality over the past decade regarding work-life balance.



(On making employees owners): “It’s not an ESOP. They’re actual shares of stock and based on your level that you’re coming in to, you may have a different amount of ownership. ... That sense of ownership penetrates deeper than just a pocketbook.”

– Will O’Brien



“If you’re in an industry where your competitor, for the most part, offers exactly what you do, the last differentiating factor is the people. With the Best Places to Work, that’s a huge advantage when you’re recruiting.”

– Peter Burke

“You’ve got to give the millennials a little bit of credit,” Burke emphasizes. “They’ve readjusted the values. I know I’m making a generalization there, but I see it over and over again. It’s like: ‘You know what? When I’m here working for you and even when I’m at home on my phone working, you have my full attention. I’m going to do everything I can for you. But I want a personal life.’”

Exposure to a variety of career opportunities is especially valuable in a small company like Ultimate Technologies Group.

“When you’re a new company, you need people to be very flexible and to wear different hats all the time. But what was interesting,” O’Brien recalls, “is where I anticipated I’d get a lot of pushback and frustration – if we hired the right people, the ones that were a good fit for us – they saw it as a benefit of working there that they got to do so many different types of things.”

It also increases their marketability within the organization.

“We assume everybody would be looking (for prime employment opportunities – internal or external) at any time of the day, so we want them always to be looking and choosing us,” Cason reflects.

An unpleasant, but important topic, is conflict and how to handle it.

“It may sound strange, but from my seat – the CEO seat – I kind of enjoy seeing some conflict sometimes because it tells me that people are passionate and they really care about what they’re trying to do,” Gause divulges. “As long as they’re professional. I’m blessed to have a strong leadership team that will challenge each other sometimes on ways to accomplish things and they check egos at the door. That’s good to see. And if other people can see that, I think it’s pretty healthy.”

### Tell the world!

One of the most exciting aspects of being named a Best Place to Work is touting the honor. Companies celebrate in a variety of ways, including advertising, promoting in email signatures and internal parties.

And of course, there’s the annual Best Place to Work in Indiana Awards Dinner. Gause describes the lively event.

“We get a table or two and as you go down there (to claim your award on stage), you whoop and holler. It’s a lot of fun.”



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