



FULL OF HEARTFELT GESTURES

McGohan Brabender

By Rebecca Patrick

Prominently displayed employee family photos bring to life what's most important and sets the tone.

Suzanne Meek recalls that day nine years ago in vivid detail.

McGohan Brabender has conversations with employees after their first 90 days. Hers was going well and then a simple question revealed so much.

“At the end, our president at the time said to me, ‘How does your family feel about you working at McGohan?’” she shares.

Meek, the vice president of human resources for all six of the firm’s Midwest offices, had taken the job because it was time for her to “run an HR and training group.” She sat there stumped – and it was a feeling that would soon repeat itself. Meek had never thought to ask her family and was floored her employer cared enough to ask.

She went home that evening and posed the question to her husband, a teacher, and two daughters as they were all sitting around the table. “After I asked, everybody stopped talking – I’ll never forget it,” Meek begins.

Jennifer, her oldest, first thought she was kidding but finally told Meek, “This is the best thing that’s ever happened to our family. You’re here, you’re present, you’re happy.” Younger daughter Nora agreed. Meek’s husband summed it up: “We get Suzanne back.”

Meek’s voice is cracking, and the tears start flowing as she recalls the scene.

“I just sat there. There was such emotion. I’m telling you I had no idea that I hadn’t been present.”

The story – better than any list of perks – illustrates why the culture at McGohan Brabender, an innovative benefits broker, is so special.

Taking flight

Founded in 1972 by Pat McGohan, the company is based out of Dayton, Ohio, with five additional locations. The Indianapolis office opened in February 2020. That’s right, just as the pandemic hit.

“We signed a seven-year lease and everybody went home,” declares Matt Heiny, executive vice president, Indiana, who has been with the company 14 years. But today, the Indianapolis arm is going strong and approaching 20 employees; corporatewide the number is close to 300.

“I firmly believe that if you have the right people in the positions, it’s easy to feel confident about decisions they’re going to make,” Heiny remarks. “I’m a big proponent of empowering others to make decisions. That’s really kind of my style of leadership. If you’ve got the right people in the right seats, they’re going to do the right thing moving forward.”

Heiny acknowledges the relationship with employees is a two-way street and points to the fundamental principles that Pat McGohan instilled.

“He had 10 or 12 things that he used to always say. One that always stuck with me was, ‘Our employees will treat our customers the way we treat them,’” he describes.

“That’s something I truly believe. If we take care of our employees as owners of the organization, they’re going to turn around and treat our clients the exact same way that we’re treating them.”

Of note, today’s team members at McGohan actually are owners thanks to a recent transition to becoming an Employee Stock Ownership

Plan, known as an ESOP.

In a sign of how well things are going, the benefits-only consulting firm serves 1,500-plus clients – focusing on the health and welfare side – that represents “about a \$1.7 billion in healthcare spend,” according to Heiny.

Within the walls

He relays that “everything” done in the Dayton headquarters is duplicated in the other locations.

Perhaps none is more visually impactful than the dedicated space of family photos from employees that adorn the wall.

“When I think about what kind of work environment we have, the family wall is indicative of what we are as an organization,” Heiny stresses. “At the end of the day, everyone comes to work, but we have to remember we all have lives outside of these walls. We never want to forget about our family. That’s the ultimate reason why we created that family wall.”

Shelly Cherry, population health and data strategist, says the sincere aspect of the culture is unlike anything she’s experienced before.

“They don’t want you to live and breathe work and not pay attention to the other things in life. So, that’s been a first for me, where they truly do push you to put your family up there and work-life balance is huge.”

A toy closet is another manifestation of that mindset.

“We encourage people that if the kids have a snow day or whatnot, and you still need to come into work to get your work done, bring in your kid. It’s totally fine,” Heiny insists. “They can go into the toy

closet, pick a toy out (and) take it with them. That’s something that’s been with our organization for a long time.”

Celebrations are also commonplace. One includes a victory cart to laud any type of success.

“If somebody passes their licensing exam, gets a new client or (is mentioned) in a letter of appreciation (that was read to the team), then hop on the victory cart,” Heiny enthuses.

The acclaimed gets to ring a bell as they’re pushed around the office and the rest of the staff joins in to rejoice. Heiny is quick to note that it’s not just for big sales wins, “it’s for everybody when they have a success at something.”

Coming through for employees

In today’s competitive environment, it can be hard for some to unplug from work and technology even for a vacation. Let alone the unease when something unexpected arises. But at McGohan Brabender, there’s no reason to worry.

Cherry came to appreciate that fully a year and a half ago. She was touched by acts of kindness after she had to have emergency spine surgery while pregnant with her fourth child, who thankfully is “here and all good.” This happened the day before she was due to hop on a plane to Texas for a work event.

Cherry conveys, “I didn’t have to worry once about my job, my work, money. When I got home from the hospital, I had phone calls and text messages from the president and the CEO in voicemails praying for me, wishing me luck. Suzanne was texting me all the time. Matt was checking in daily with my

husband. My coworker brought me a card and it was full of hundreds and hundreds of dollars of gift cards.

“I didn’t even have to blink when it came to work. It just all worked itself out,” she marvels. “To have that support and everybody kind of stopping what they were doing to take care of me was pretty amazing.”

Senior account manager Brian Doll, a 10-year company veteran, came with Heiny from Cincinnati to open the Indiana location.

Doll recalls it “was really, really special” how the company rallied around him a few years ago when a relative passed away.

“They allowed me and my family to grieve and to cope and then return to work knowing that we had this entire support system between all the offices around us.”

True to its ‘core’

Meek says this is both intentional and genuine, stemming from “cultivating a culture of care,” which is one of the company’s four core truths. The others being: “keeping first things first” – in a nod to family, “using uncommon sense” and “making the future brilliant” with innovative thinking.

“We make sure that all managers know if something traumatic is happening, we cover for employees so that they can handle that or if something significant is happening in their family life.”

The thoughtfulness is infused in many other ways.

Quarterly, the firm supports a nonprofit by donating time and talents to complete projects.

“Serving our communities, it’s in our



One of McGohan Brabender’s “Give Back” events takes place in the kitchen at Second Helpings. The firm’s core truths, anchored in a culture of care, are what sets it apart and rallies team members.



fabric. It's in our DNA," Doll asserts. "It's super important to all of us."

Long-term care insurance for employees is fully paid for and provides peace of mind. Flowers welcome someone to the team on day one. And every employee gets a \$50 Amazon gift card on their birthday.

"Sometimes that is the only thing that the employee gets for their birthday," Meek notes. "So, that is something that we will continue to do."

Making it work

Cherry had been in the health and wellness field for over 13 years before coming to McGohan Brabender. She was eager to get back to the bigger picture of population health and the impact it can have on groups and communities. The only trouble was there really wasn't a role like that available for her at the firm. But McGohan Brabender made her a deal.

"They said, 'Work with us, help us get the office growing in Indianapolis (where she was born and raised) ... we know what you're wanting' – and here we are," Cherry exclaims. "They didn't turn down my ideas and my thoughts. They were patient with me, and I was patient with them. I got in at my dream role they created for me at two years."

Beyond the openness to career growth, it's the sense of acceptance that loudly resonates for Doll.

"When you come to work every day, you can be your true self in order to take care of our clients. The culture is phenomenal and you just feel that positive energy," he offers. "You have direct access to



At the firm, pets are welcome in the office. In fact, the company believes they help "make the future brilliant."

anyone within the company ... and you're not a number based on seniority, based on title, but you're really considered a family member. That's so important to me. And I've cherished that since day one."

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