



Holiday World opened in 1946 as Santa Claus Land and became Holiday World in 1984 when it added a variety of holiday sections. A focus on family – employees and visitors – has always been a cornerstone.

# BRINGING CULTURE TO LIFE

## Leaders Drive Success With Empathy, Empowerment

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

What does it mean to “show up” for employees – and what strategies help catapult productivity, quality and loyalty among workers?

There’s no easy or single answer, but the key for HR leaders and front-line managers is to treat employees not as numbers but as individuals who matter.

“I’m challenged every day knowing that there are lots of ways I need to be showing up for my team,” asserts Krista Skidmore, CEO and founder of Indianapolis-based global leadership consulting firm FlashPoint Leadership. “It’s harder to be a leader now more than ever. And I’m asked to move fast, think more strategically and lead more humanely. All at one time. It’s something I strive to live up to, and our managers do as well.

“Instead of ‘code switching’ or faking it – you bring your full energy to be the best version of yourself at work. When people are operating in those strengths, it creates an environment where people feel heard and safe and empowered to contribute.”

### Leading with intention

Every workplace has a “vibe.” Some are carefully crafted and others develop organically. Holiday World & Splashin’ Safari is a

fourth-generation, family-owned theme park. It has approximately 105 full-time and about 2,200 seasonal employees. Through its 80-year history (with no signs of slowing down), it’s promoted a family atmosphere for employees and guests.

That feeling is built around the notion of service – internal and external.

Holiday World’s training model leverages what president and CEO Matt Eckert calls the three C’s: coaching (developing the team), caring (showing empathy) and clarifying (setting clear expectations).

“If you look at the makeup of our employee base, we have everyone from age 14 all the way up to age 85,” Eckert shares. “The way we develop them and lead them and coach them is going to be different depending upon what generation they’re from. But the root core of all of it – given the type of business we are – is that no matter what your age, we’re training and coaching our team members to understand that service is the No.1 priority and to really focus on how to create a very simple model they can follow.”

Established in 2002, FlashPoint partners with medium- and large-size organizations across a variety of industries. Authenticity is woven into the culture.

“The core areas that always rise to the top for us when we talk to our team: values

driven, collaborative, deeply human centered and performance centric,” Skidmore affirms. “All of them drive our behavior and commitments to each other. We say things like, we don’t do things to people, we do things with people. That creates this vibe that is distinctly collaborative and co-creative.”

trueU is a resource for purpose-driven companies to build strong cultures that attract and retain great talent. President and partner Chris Mills stresses the importance of front-line and middle managers actually living out characteristics of the culture.

“There was an article – it’s a little old now, but I want to say it was 2022 about how they’re really the implementers of the culture and have the most impact on employees. The CEO can espouse whatever they want around culture, but if the front-line and middle managers aren’t aligned and behaving (in a way that supports that culture), the employees are going to leave.”

### Guiding and growing

That sentiment also is embodied at Indiana State University (ISU), as the institution collaborates with approximately 1,200 to 1,500 student employees depending upon the time of year.

Recently, student supervisors explored the widely used DiSC Assessment®, a personal and professional development tool that

categorizes behavior into four primary types: Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S) and Compliance (C).

“(The training centered on) helping them think about how students can personally recognize strengths, values and different behaviors and how they show up in the workplace,” remarks Carrie Lutz, associate vice president of student experience and engagement.

FlashPoint, which partners with the Indiana Chamber on its Supervising & Managing People Workshops throughout the year, uses the DiSC Assessment with attendees.

“By understanding our own tendencies, our own triggers, our own communication styles, using something like DiSC helps equip people with language and words to use and insights,” Skidmore stresses. “And you can’t do that if your own stuff is getting in the way.”

Healthy – and frequent – communication is paramount.

Skidmore points to Development Dimensions International’s 2025 global leadership forecast. “(It says) employees are nine times more likely to trust their manager if they get regular feedback and coaching.”

“A lot of people look at coaching as a one-time thing done annually,” Eckert asserts. “To me, that’s not what coaching is. Coaching is having continual conversations and asking questions. We start training from day one – from the time we start onboarding them – and we have scheduled trainings throughout the season. Hospitality trainings. Leadership trainings. It’s making sure we instill all of those skill sets with them.”

“We (seek input) from our seasonal team members too. We have high school- and college-age kids, and they like that constant interaction. They like to be able to give their opinions. So, rather than walking around saying, ‘Hey, Joe, you need to do this.’ You walk around and say, ‘What do you think would be a better way to maybe do that?’ Let them take and lead the conversation and let them give their input and then go from there.”

Lutz values such an approach and encourages weekly or bi-weekly conversations.

“We as a society have grown more conflict avoidant. Meeting every week or every other week doesn’t let things build up for anyone if there’s something they have to share with me or if there’s something I have to share with them. We’re meeting it as head on as we can versus waiting for a performance evaluation or calling (an unexpected) meeting, and then nobody knows what it is and everybody freaks out.”

## Well-being and making connections

Those regular check-ins don’t just surface issues early – they signal that people are seen, supported and valued. When leaders build that kind of trust, well-being becomes a shared responsibility, and connections strengthen across teams. At ISU, wellness is woven into the culture in practical, day-to-day ways.

“Our president, Dr. Mike Godard, has a lot of energy,” Lutz notes. “He’s visible and his top-down, engaged leadership has been uplifting. Dr. Godard’s background is exercise science, so he’s a huge advocate in support of staff getting out and moving and making sure they’re finding those things that fuel them.”

Student supervisor training utilizes the Wellness Wheel Assessment, which features eight important dimensions of wellness: emotional, financial, environmental, intellectual, occupational, physical, social and spiritual.

of well-being: being present for employees.

“A lot of it too comes down to ... letting our team members know we’re not just sitting in our offices here at the park,” Eckert emphasizes. “We’re talking to our team members and making those connections and building those relationships and showing them that they have somebody on their side. We’re making sure they feel comfortable to know they have someone they can go talk to if they need to. If they want to come talk to me, fantastic.”

“I try to make it very clear that, yes, I’m president of the company, but I’m present and if you need something, please come to me. If I can’t help you, I will definitely find somebody that can.”

Mills recalls a situation when a team member experienced a family emergency and trueU offered its full support.



The trueU team – practicing what it preaches about cultivating culture – bonds at a local brewery.

“We encourage them to do that not only with their student teams, but also with their professional staff teams,” Lutz explains. “We’ve talked about making sure we’re not just focusing on the mind – because the gut is connected to the mind. Helping them have that dialogue to understand mental health is so much more than the mind because (many factors) contribute to the health of the mind.”

Holiday World also prioritizes mental health.

“We have wellness training and bring in a wellness coach once a month to meet with our team for those who want to be involved,” Eckert comments. “The wellness coach will set goals and check in with them on a monthly basis.”

He points to another major component

“We didn’t try to dance around it, because sometimes if you dance around it, people feel like we’re not really considering their emotions. We offloaded work to be able to help. And you know what? We just had the real conversation. We asked, ‘How are you feeling?’ And said, ‘If you don’t want to tell us how you’re feeling, that’s okay.’”

Skidmore adds, “Connected to mental health well-being are things like feeling included, being trusted and reducing unnecessary stress by creating clarity.”

“You can have empathy and accountability. You can set clear expectations, but also show some flexibility and support and understanding without lowering your standards.”

**RESOURCES:** Matt Eckert, Holiday World & Splashin’ Safari, at [holidayworld.com](http://holidayworld.com) | Carrie Lutz, Indiana State University Division of Student Experience and Engagement, at [indianastate.edu/about/engagement](http://indianastate.edu/about/engagement) | Chris Mills, trueU, at [www.trueu.com](http://www.trueu.com) | Krista Skidmore, FlashPoint Leadership, at [www.flashpointleadership.com](http://www.flashpointleadership.com)