

THE PEOPLE PERSPECTIVE



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For Workplace News

Does being an admired company actually amount to anything tangible in terms of employee practices? The answer is yes.

Do the factors that contribute to an organization's status as an employer of choice actually enhance its desirability as a great place to work? Again, yes.

So how do you get beyond the public relations and into what really counts? None of the companies we think of as having a desired corporate brand or reputation as employer of choice set out to achieve that status deliberately. Rather, those labels arose out of a consistent internal reality.

So what do you need to do to make that status real!

Why can't you simply imitate the best?

Companies are made up of value sets that develop over the years. If you want to understand those values, look to the leaders or founders of the organization. What did they believe in? How did they act under pressure? What drove them to succeed? What really mattered to them? Those are the core principles that get perpetuated and reinforced in succeeding generations, even unknowingly.

Building employee loyalty

They are what feels right and defines normal, in the deepest sense. They become the culture of the company.

To say that you will magically transform your firm by studying and replicating the best means you have to change what makes things right and wrong. You can't expect people to trade in their deeply held beliefs easily. Yet most organizations think all it takes is a combination of an OD intervention, good marketing and a new slogan or two.

A financial institution decided to make its performance management program values based. Teamwork, it decided, was what mattered. So it built an elaborate rewards mechanism to reflect that, which worked fine until their culture bit them.

One day, the chairman publicly rewarded an individual for closing a major deal. Of course, the individual hadn't operated alone — that one act ended the credibility of teamwork as a value.

Can you re-brand a company?

The easy answer is no, but you can discover the brand that's already there. An advertising firm was brought into a well-known computer company and asked to help define the employee brand. It was successful because it studied how employees were treated under normal circumstances and during tough times. By defining what already existed, it clarified the real employee brand.

Another firm this same agency worked with also looked to its past for clues to its future. As part of that branding effort, it purchased the garage the founders originally used and focused on it as a symbol of the organization's values.

In other words, unless you are a young organization, with all or many of the original employees, you can't create an employee brand out of nothing. You have to look inside yourself and celebrate the brand that already exists.

If you don't like what you see, then you will need to change; but real values change can be a long journey. Don't expect results until after seven years of sustained, reinforced and deliberate branding.

Along the way, will come moments of truth when values are tested, lived up to, acknowledged, rewarded, celebrated and talked about — or not.

FedEx and Southwest Airlines didn't develop their employee brands out of a list of buzz words — they fostered an already powerful culture by living those values.

Next time you're flying Air Canada, ask a former Canadian crew member whether they like doing things the Red Team way. Those two cultures were recognizably different.

It may be easy to merge financial books — but it's not easy to merge tribes.

How to become an employer of choice?

Being an employer of choice means your employees are treated the way they want to be treated. Your employees chose your organization. They will stay or leave because of those values and the way their direct supervisor lives them.

Do you know what those values are? Do you use them as your guide in all business decisions? Do you hire and fire based on those values? Are your values a part of the review process? Are they measured and celebrated in the performance management process? Are they clear enough so everyone has a consistent understanding of what they mean on the job?

I asked a senior Federal government employee, committed to making her department an employer of choice, whether she had recently promoted anyone to a senior role who did not live the organization's newly stated values. She admitted that the last three promoted managers were known by their peers and staff to be exceptions to those values.

Ask your employees whether your efforts at becoming an employer of choice are meaningful or not. If you are imposing values that don't fit or not living up to stated values, they'll let you know.

If you're having a retention problem, analyze who is leaving and why; and check out who, specifically ex-employees, are leaving and why. People leave managers more often than they leave companies. Where is your break down in values occurring? Is there a virus in the organization?

Do what is right according to the values that you passionately live and you will discover your employee brand within your own company.

Following another company's reputation or a consultant's map, might look good on paper — but it won't feel right in your heart; and it won't last. ●

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