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Creating a great place to work

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Our people are our greatest asset. How many times do we hear this tarnished, worn out old cliché trotted out? Undervalued through over use, it's a glib platitude that often has no basis in fact at the companies who use it, where there is no policy or infrastructure to encourage the best and brightest on board.

But when organisations can say it and mean it, then they have a truly powerful message. That's what creating a great place to work is all about: attracting, keeping, encouraging and inspiring the best people to do their best possible work. There are clear financial benefits to doing so: reduced staff churn, a higher number of recruiting referrals and better contracts stand out. But these are almost side effects. Fundamentally creating a great place to work is simply the right thing to do, if you want to feel good about what you do.

Based on our own experience at The Structure Group, here are our suggestions for creating a great place to work.

Put people at the centre of your operating model

This is the cornerstone of being a great employer, whatever business you are in. This is the standard you create and execute against. It sounds straightforward enough, but that simplicity can be deceptive. And paradoxically, it is often harder for consultancy-type organisations where attracting, retaining and deploying a high calibre of individual is fundamental to success, and the bottom line is measured in pounds per head. Winning work depends on the quality of people, so if you have a consistent and uncompromising focus on getting the right people into your organisation then you have the foundations for an attractive workplace.

Encouraging ownership

The best ideas do not always come from the upper echelons of your organisation! If suggestions from junior members of staff are passed to senior management to execute, you discourage innovation and encourage divisions within your organisation. However, give people ownership of their own ideas and recognise their contribution then you get the creativity back and build up strong bonds of loyalty and community within the company.

Make people feel part of the company

Encouraging ownership is in fact part of the wider picture of making people feel part of the company as a whole, and not just a cog in the wheel of their particular project. Since consultants typically spend much of their working lives on site with clients, it can be easy to lose sight of your firm and its culture. For relatively young consultancies it's also far too easy to create divisions between old hands and fresh faces, and for cliques to develop.

The solutions can range from regular company meetings in a central location to "I am a name, not a number" T-shirts. We've even had two staff members dress up as Richard and Judy to interview new starters, and find out more about what makes them tick. There are plenty of ways to make people feel as though they belong, they just need to be constantly repeated. Success is in small things carried out day after day after day.

Build up trust

Upside down management is the buzzword here, and it's an appropriate one for consultancy businesses in particular. It's about breaking down hierarchies and recognizing that all levels of staff are on the client site day in, day out. So it's just as important for more junior employees to live the culture and values as it is for the more senior staff. If there is a lack of transparency in the company, if they do not trust the management, or do not believe in what they are doing then it shows in the most crucial area – with the client. Trust stems from openness and its why making people part of the company is so important.

Show appreciation

Everyone likes to be thanked. And in many cases it is no more complicated than that. But if you can think of minor and non-costly ways to add to that, then so much the better: vouchers, away-days, dinners have all made an appearance at The Structure Group.

Certainly everyone should earn what they deserve – and deserve what they earn. But that doesn't mean you should fall into the trap of relying solely on a high salary to motivate your staff: financial remuneration is only part of what gets people out of bed in the morning and inspires them to do their best work. If the relationship between you and your staff is based purely on money, then you lose the sense of community, loyalty and trust that you have built up. As soon as someone else waves a slightly larger cheque in front of their eyes staff will be off.

Personalisation

It may be a statement of the obvious, but one size does not fit all. Company policy and guidelines are essential to help create a level playing field for all your staff, but individuals are individuals, so training, recruitment, gifts, everything needs to take that into account. For example, someone coming from a non-consulting background will have different training requirements to an industry stalwart.

It's also an opportunity to reassess the 'up or out' approach common in consulting organisations. Career paths differ and progress at a different pace. Not everyone fits on the same escalator: some will go slower and actually want to progress slower because they have young children, an urge to go travelling, or a trans-continental relationship. It's not about an absence of ambition, it's just that people want and need different things at different times. An organisation that fits round people will be far more successful at keeping them than one that expects employees to bend to its will.

Encourage a sense of fun

"Work hard, play hard." Another of the clichés that surrounds business life. But putting the fun into work is more than that. You need your people to have a sense of passion about what they do and who they work for – and that doesn't come solely from Friday night drinking sessions. They put a lot of themselves into the job to be successful, so you need to give them the room to be more than just the professional face they put on for clients. What's more, your members of staff have to get on with each other, especially if they are stuck together on site. Have company barbecues, invite partners and children, and if someone is prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice and impersonate TV interviewers to find out what makes colleagues tick, then even better.

Inclusivity

Small companies inevitably have a strong culture, built on the personalities of the founders and initial employees. But eventually it stops being scalable, and the real challenge of how to maintain the culture while being open to all types of people kicks in. That's when you have to build a culture that embraces many different types of people. With growing companies there is a serious risk that the culture actually becomes a barrier, so we need to work hard to ensure that the inclusive environment becomes a club that wants to have new people and that new people want to join.

Pride

It's often hard to define what pride means within an organisation – but you know when you have it. And it comes from the top. It's about doing the best work for the client, and being choosy about what you do: going for only the best assignments, and turning down contracts where you know you can't do an exemplary job. It's about going to a dinner party and not mumbling the answer when people ask you what you do! If people have a sense of pride in the company, its achievements and plans they will get pleasure from that. And that's incredibly important - there's no point in coming to work if you don't enjoy what you do.

Integrity

If putting people at the centre is the foundation of your organisation then integrity is the cement that holds it together, and it applies to everything you do. There's a virtuous circle of doing the right thing, attracting the right people and creating a positive place to work. But without adequate attention it's a fragile circle: trust, community, and loyalty are hard to earn but easy to lose. You know you're getting it right if you are prepared to explain every decision you make face to face with the people affected by it. But most of all, if you're happy to recruit friends and family to your organisation then you know you're on to a winner.

By Jim Hayward, Senior Partner, The Structure Group

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