



How To: Develop a Culture of Personal Growth

Helping employees lead more fulfilled lives is good for business.

★★★★★ Emma Johnson |

There's nothing new to the idea that happy employees boost the bottom line. But what really makes workers happy in a meaningful way? And how do you build a company culture that nurtures this happiness—and at what expense?



“There are many old business models that used science and control to try to get the most of their employees by treating them as robots,” says Danna Beal, workplace consultant and author of *The Extraordinary Workplace: Replacing Fear with Trust and Compassion*. “When a company ignores the hearts and souls of its employees, it can be likened to shooting a hole in the gas tank and then asking why they aren’t getting better mileage. People are the energy that drives the company. When companies help people develop as whole people, they then develop their full potential—including at work.”

There is plenty of evidence that these work-based programs are dollars well invested. University of Calgary professors found that the No. 2 most important thing that made people happy at work is a strong sense of engagement, following flexible work schedules. This was followed by a sense of being appreciated at work, and the ability to try new things professionally.

A few program ideas that can help promote personal growth:

- ⇒ Bring in speakers for regularly scheduled “lunch and learn” sessions on topics that might include goal setting, time management or health/nutrition/disease management and prevention.
- ⇒ Offer free biometric screenings and health risk appraisals, then connect employees with one-on-one health counselors or facilitate support groups to help identify and achieve health-related goals.
- ⇒ Implement “walking meetings”—whereby you hoof it during the face-to-face session.
- ⇒ Start book clubs with a reading list of suggested titles that underscore your company’s philosophy.
- ⇒ Offer your office and campus as a meeting place for employees’ interests outside of work—volunteer committees, sports practice or professional organizations.
- ⇒ Create a format in which workers can showcase their non-work-related passions—whether a talent show, rotating gallery exhibits, videos of employee projects on the intranet, or a designated section in the newsletter.
- ⇒ Offer the services of a financial advisor to help employees work toward personal finance goals.

- ⇒ In Juniper Networks' annual "Learn & Lead Week," employees at all levels and departments learn mentoring skills and leadership skills, and connect through dinners sponsored by senior leaders.
- ⇒ Encourage employees to start office-based clubs focused on interests such as sports, crafts, or green or volunteer initiatives.
- ⇒ Designate a quiet room where workers can take a break and meditate or otherwise quiet their minds.
- ⇒ At the e-commerce firm Shopify, the performance review is focused on self-analysis and career growth and planning, and training is focused on an area of interest to the employee.

First Person



Company: Defender Direct, maker of home security systems, Indianapolis

Source: Marcia Raab, president

Number of Sales Reps: 1,600

Philosophy: "Businesses don't grow. People do."

Evidence it works: An average of 60 percent organic growth—no debt—each of the 12 years of business

We believe we can only grow as fast as our people do, and we back that up with job training and approaching our employees as whole people, and encouraging them to work harder on themselves than they do at their jobs. For our part, we are committed to developing leaders—not just at work, but at home and in their communities and lives. We invest more money developing employees from an emotional, health, financial, intellectual and spiritual standpoint than we do on job training.

Every Monday is "Defender Culture Day." That is when I personally meet new employees for two hours to talk about setting goals and getting your very best results as a person. We never mention job skills or filling out forms. Since we exist to grow leaders, I've fulfilled my mission if they get something out of that session.

Every employee who has been with us at least two years is sent to the Successful Life Course, along with another important person in their life—usually a spouse, parent or child. This personal growth and goal-setting seminar costs us \$3,000 per couple, plus flights, but the results are phenomenal. Employees credit it with helping them buy their first home, getting debt free, saving their relationship, and losing 75 pounds.

At some point in their career with us, all of our employees and their immediate families are flown to Mexico to participate in one of the homebuilding programs we partner with. You might ask if it wouldn't be cheaper to just give the money we invest directly to the programs, and it would, but what we get back are employees who see their work as meaningful and purposeful. The same goes for the fact that the company tithes 10 percent of our profits.

Other programs include the book clubs at all of our 125 locations. Also, each year all of our employees are flown in for a one-day convention which focuses on goal setting, and then has breakout sessions which include health, spirituality, attitude development and charitable giving.

All this is not touchy-feely business. We are world-class at what we do, and we have better sales results and customer service than our competition. This also doesn't mean that we don't pay our people competitive wages—we pay them very well. Also, the fact that we are serving and loving doesn't mean that we don't cut nonperformers. People are created to add value. They don't want to get a handout.

People here tell us they're doing the best work they've done in their careers, and at the same time they're happy at home. It does cost a lot to invest so much in our people, but we exceed our profit goals and obviously we're growing, so I can't argue with the results.

First Person



Company: The Integer Group, marketing firm, Denver

Source: John Moyers, chief integration officer

Number of Sales Reps: 1,000

Philosophy: Happy employees better serve clients, and happy clients give you more business and referrals.

Evidence it works: Revenue growth every year but one in 18 years; turnover near the goal of 10 percent annually; six consecutive years ranked on *Entrepreneur's* “Great Places to Work”

We're incredibly passionate about creating an environment that gets the most out of our people. It stems from many years ago, when we were inspired by the book *The Service Profit Chain: How Leading Companies Link Profit and Growth to Loyalty, Satisfaction, and Value*, which found that companies with the most satisfied employees had the most satisfied clients and were the most profitable. We have grown every year except one.

On the work front, our leadership institutions take employees we think have a lot of potential, and groups of 25 go through Harvard-style classes, bond, then are encouraged to take what they learn to their jobs. Every day between 1 and 4 p.m. is “creative time,” when there are to be no meetings scheduled. This provides time for employees to absorb information and develop new thoughts. Creativity doesn't just happen because you ask it to.

Also, every employee goes through a communications course to better understand their communications style as well as that of their colleagues. This is a great tool that boosts self-awareness and productivity.

But we also acknowledge that our employees are whole people with complete lives. Someone who is effective or satisfied in their work is a person whose whole life is fulfilling. For example, we sponsor car-seat installation workshops and parenting classes—we're a young organization and have had more than 500 babies born to our employees. We recognize that parenting is a challenge, so if we as an organization can support that, there is payback in the level of engagement in the office.

Our Be You With Us program offers a block of extra vacation days at the employees' five, 10- and 15-year anniversaries, which they are encouraged to spend on something they are passionate about, then report back to us about their experience. This can include a hobby, spending time with family or an adventure. We recently had a young man who painted and wrote as he took a cross-country road trip, and put on a show about his experience when he returned. Another employee reported about using her time to adopt a baby.

One of the highlights is our annual “Creative Circus” in which all employees are encouraged to express their personal passion during a workday afternoon. We have food talent, a gallery with painting and photography, writing, and a soundstage that features about 25 music and comedy acts. For several years I performed my sixth-grade gymnastics routine to Kansas's *Dust in the Wind* wearing the same unitard. My family doesn't allow me to do it anymore.

A lot of our efforts are a lot of fun, but revenue and profitability are the ultimate measure of how successful we are as company. And we have been very successful as a company.

First Person



Company: Softchoice, IT product and service provider, Toronto, with offices throughout Canada and the United States

Source: Nick Foster, senior vice president of business development

Number of Sales Reps: 900

Philosophy: Grow as people. We're in it for growth.

Evidence it works: Significant business growth in the United States and Canada in the past five years; named “Top Workplace” by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and “Best Workplace in Canada” for six years by *The Globe and Mail*

We all crave personal growth. As a company we fundamentally believe that your best hours are between 8 and 5, and if you're not engaged in meaningful activity between those hours, you're going to job-hop until you find it.

We are focused on developing our strengths, not focusing on weaknesses. Our strengths course, called Morpheus, has taken early-stage employees through a two-day offsite training to help identify their strengths. This program has been going for 10 years and is 98 percent focused on personal development—opposed to company or industry-specific information. It emphasizes the feedback you get from the world, what people say about you, and how you can adjust to be more successful as a person.

To help all of our employees grow personally and professionally, in January we asked each one to write a “leap statement.” This was a written commitment to change something or learn something new in their personal or professional life—it might be to improve time management, or improve the way they deal with customers. Each manager is responsible for following up in our twice-yearly reviews. These reviews

are designed to give employees dynamic feedback on how to be successful—it's not just ticking boxes. We owe it to our employees to help them succeed.

Another important part of our work culture is our Softchoice Cares program. This has grown out of the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 when our employees organized themselves and raised \$85,000, which sponsored sending three of our employees to Asia to build three homes over two weeks. Today, Softchoice Cares consists of a self-selected board of employees who determine how the company is going to be charitable. Our efforts have been focused on bridging the digital divide in places like Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Uganda and North American women's shelters and low-income housing.

We back this philanthropic work by providing our employees two paid days per year to volunteer on any project they choose. Our employees care more about the bottom line, and a big part of our recruiting process is answering prospective workers' questions about our commitment to charity.

A good workplace makes employees feel like their company invests in them for the long term. Our biggest focus is on developing and measuring employee satisfaction, and ours is in the stratospheric levels. This turns into great returns for shareholders, which creates more opportunities for growth for our employees—that keeps the cycle going around.



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