

Bringing staff in on decisions typifies a great workplace

Perpetual communication enhances office culture, local executives say

By AMARIS ELLIOTT-ENGEL

One component local leaders agree makes a company a “Great Place to Work” is open communication with employees. Transparency and listening to employee feedback is key to their company cultures, they say, and must be done every day.

“There are no secrets here,” says Alan Sikora, chief executive officer of First American Equipment Finance, an office equipment rental service in Fairport.

At First American, which ranked 14th on the 2016 national Great Places to Work list in the midsize workplace category, open and honest communication is a priority, especially during times of challenges. Because of this emphasis, Sikora says, sometimes a solution will arise from an unexpected place within the workforce.

The company also uses employee surveys to keep workplace values in focus, Sikora says. For example, a survey about leadership strategy formed the agenda for a meeting on that topic.

Meetings are another tool First American employs to promote a culture of transparency. Sikora points to monthly meetings for “all hands,” a meeting kicking off the fiscal year in Toronto and a midyear meeting in the Rochester area that foster an atmosphere of continuous communication.

There are about 200 employees at First American. “We often say we have 200 owners of culture at First American,” Sikora says.

At Dixon Schwabl Inc. a marketing relations agency in Victor, employees play a big role in forming company culture: they voted on the firm’s core values, says chief executive officer Lauren Dixon. They selected respect, integrity, community, teamwork and fun.

Dixon and her husband, firm president Mike Schwabl, did not want to select the values that would articulate the “heart and soul” of the company culture, Dixon says. As a result, the employees in place at the time “felt heard,” Dixon says.

“That is one of the most important things in building a culture,” she adds. “People don’t have to get their way every time. Just the sheer opportunity to provide feedback is critically important.”

The strategy seems to have worked, as Dixon Schwabl was ranked the 51st midsize company on the Great Places to Work list last year.

Britton Lui, Dixon Schwabl’s vice president of people and development, notes that Dixon Schwabl is planning to re-evaluate the core values for the company at an upcoming staff retreat of all 124 employees.

“Are these five values still relevant?” Lui asks. “Are there other ones we might want to consider?”

As Dixon Schwabl has gotten larger, it has become more of a challenge to bring people together in the company, Lui says. The company has lived up to its corporate value of fun by having ice cream socials every Thursday in the summer, holding periodic scavenger hunts that force employees to run through the whole building in order to win, and having teams for all sorts of sports.

To keep the lines of communication



Photo by Kate Melton

“Our vision is to become the best company to work with and the best company to work for,” says Alan Sikora, chief executive officer of First American Equipment Finance.

open, Dixon Schwabl holds a companywide meeting every Wednesday at 8:30 a.m. at which Dixon and Schwabl give a “state of state” about new clients, success stories, coworker birthdays and what is coming up in the next seven days.

Keeping employees involved in all aspects of business allows for a freer exchange of ideas. Dixon Schwabl is not hierarchical, and employees don’t have to “go through any kind of gatekeeper” to address concerns, Lui says.

As a result of employee feedback, Dixon Schwabl doubled its 401(k) contributions, increased its healthcare contributors, began to allow people to work from home and added short-term disability for millennial employees who are starting to have babies, Dixon says.

ESL Federal Credit Union in Rochester, which ranked 25th on the 2016 Great Places to Work list in the midsize workplace category, also prioritizes employee input. David Brooks, senior vice president of banking services, says that ESL’s formal corporate values of initiative, integrity, accountability, teamwork and caring about

people “are the foundation of our culture.”

ESL is able to ensure it measures up to those values through its consistent surveys of employees. As a result of these surveys, ESL has modified its dress code, increased vacation time for long-term employees, organized social events throughout the building and established a volunteer program for employees interested in giving back to the community, Brooks says.

Survey results are shared with employees in order to be transparent, he adds.

“When we get survey results, we are diligent about opening them back up to employees so they know what their participation means and that we, as a company, actually take action against the feedback we get,” Brooks says.

Francine Patella Ryan, ESL’s public affairs manager, says the credit union is paying constant attention to the employee experience and strives to keep all employees informed about important issues facing the company.

That includes an intranet website that addresses any information an employee would want to know, significant investment in

professional development and training and rewarding employees for following ESL’s values, whether it’s a boss giving a gift card to an employee for a job well done or honoring a high-achieving employee with a VIP award and monetary gift at a quarterly breakfast, Brooks and Ryan say.

Employees “know there’s truth behind when we say, ‘We’re going to do it.’ We do it. There’s an integrity behind it,” Ryan says.

Addressing what employees want from the workplace culture means dividends for the company bottom line, local business leaders say.

“When we take care of our employees, our employees take care of our customers,” Brooks says. “Naturally, through that relationship the company does well and the company’s success, in turn, rejuvenates the community.”

Because First American is a financial services company, there is a lot of interaction between clients and employees.

“Our clients choose to work with us because of our people,” Sikora says. “If we’re interacting with a high level executive at a hospital or law firm, they can tell we genuinely like our jobs and genuinely respect our employees and colleagues,” which turns into growth and referrals for more business.

First American’s growth has allowed it to double its employee base in the last five years and launch several new initiatives like a vendor finance business and serving new industries such as the life sciences, Sikora says.

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Dixon Schwabl requires that its clients share its core values, Dixon and Lui say.

Keeping a client who is disrespectful to employees would render the company’s core values meaningless, Dixon says.

“Sometimes companies are just in it to make money,” Lui says.

Another key part of the development of a successful workplace team is the recruitment of the right employees, local business leaders say.

Brooks says that ESL focuses on hiring people who align with its five core values. “In order to deliver a superior customer service experience, we have to deliver a superior employee experience,” Brooks says.

Dixon Schwabl will keep a position open for several months until it finds the right candidate who meets all of its core values, Dixon says. On the community value, a job candidate won’t get very far if he spends his weekends playing video games versus volunteering in the community, Dixon says.

Job finalists are interviewed by the entire department they would be working with, Dixon says. Team members will joke around with each other and try to engage candidates with humor, she adds.

“We make sure every single decision is made through that lens (of core values), from hiring to even letting clients go if they don’t share our core values,” Dixon says.

Maintaining First American’s culture starts with being careful about who is hired, Sikora says.

“First American is a place where everybody’s voice is heard,” he says. “We take suggestions very seriously and act upon them. And it’s a place full of genuine, kind people who are happy to see one another succeed.”

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