

Bosses at great workplaces strive to lead by example

By SHEILA LIVADAS - 6/18/2010

Though they come from different industries and backgrounds, bosses at "best places to work" often act as motivators, sounding boards and mentors. They strive to lead by example, promoting an atmosphere of open communication and respect.

When a staffer at Klein Steel Service Inc. does something that illustrates candor, integrity or another of the firm's 10 core values, retired Army Maj. Gen. John Batiste trumpets the achievement at the monthly all-employee communication meeting.

Batiste, now in his fifth year as president of the Rochester firm, believes celebrating good work enables staffers and the company to succeed, says Patrick DiLaura, chief talent officer for Klein Steel. The firm recently was ranked as one of the Best Companies to Work for in New York by the Society for Human Resource Management's state chapter.

At Wegmans Food Markets Inc., the top brass inspire staffers to model leaders' behavior, says Kevin Stickles, vice president of human resources for the supermarket chain.

Danny Wegman, CEO, and Colleen Wegman, president, pour attention and sincerity into chatting with staffers. Stickles says that behavior "cascades all the way down" through the company.

"It's got to start at the top, the vision and the caring for the employees," he says.

Fortune magazine ranked the supermarket chain third on its national 100 Best Companies to Work For list this year and first in 2005. Feedback from a random sampling of staffers counts for two-thirds of a company's score.

Leading a best-place-to-work firm also means absorbing and acting on constructive criticism, company officials say.

Two years ago, Klein Steel debuted an annual survey that asked for staffers' input on what was going well at the business and what could be improved. The results of the survey, conducted every July by a third party to ensure staffer confidentiality, help identify priorities for the coming year, DiLaura says.

In the very first survey, Klein Steel staffers suggested that the firm's managers build their mentoring skills. That feedback prompted the development of the firm's certified leader program, which is completing its first round this month.

The fact that staffers' suggestions did not fall on deaf ears sets the stage for more meaningful feedback in the future, DiLaura says.

"I think that's helped build a great sense of pride and ownership among our team members in what we're doing as a company," he says.

In its recent honor from the New York State Society for Human Resource Management, the firm ranked 18th on the list of Best Companies to Work for in New York. It also was named the highest-scoring manufacturer in the small-to-midsize category.

Specializing in selling steel, stainless steel and aluminum to builders, manufacturers and others, Klein Steel has grown on several fronts in recent years. Besides undergoing a \$9 million renovation at its Rochester headquarters, the firm expanded its Buffalo operations and added a sales office in Albany.

In the fourth quarter of 2008, after a period of soaring plate and sheet steel prices, Klein Steel's leaders turned to staffers for recommendations on how to improve efficiency and eliminate waste.

"You would not believe the quality of input we received from our team members that are out there on the front line," DiLaura says.

The action plan that sprang from the suggestions, including temporarily reducing management's salaries, enabled the firm to avoid layoffs, unlike many of its competitors.

As a best place to work, Wegmans also encourages staffers to solve problems creatively, Stickles says. The leadership approaches their ideas, even those that may not be home runs, with a degree of humility to keep the input flowing.

Training and developing employees sometimes calls for managers and leaders to have a soft touch, Stickles says. That may mean "holding them up for a little while (until) they get their feet underneath them, while they're learning. But then you have to let them fly," he says.

Ranked among Fortune magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For every year since 1998 and slated to open its 76th store next month, Wegmans aims for its leadership to be very visible, Stickles says. Now in his 27th year with the company, he typically spends two days a week at one of the chain's stores, interacting with employees and customers.

"You get the emotion and the true story of what's going on," which e-mail and phone calls cannot convey, Stickles says.

Leaders at Paychex Inc., which ranked No. 54 on Fortune magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For list this year, also strive to be very visible, says Will Kuchta, vice president of organizational development.

The leadership at the firm, which had more than 100 offices serving roughly 554,000 payroll clients as of May 2009, sets an egalitarian tone, Kuchta adds. President and CEO Jonathan Judge and other executives eat lunch in the same cafeteria as other staffers and do not have reserved parking spots.

Two-way communication is a cornerstone of the firm's corporate culture, so that staffers never feel bashful about approaching the company's leaders, Kuchta says.

Paychex, which has appeared on Fortune's list seven times since 2002 and has received similar honors five times from Computerworld magazine, prizes diverse leadership styles, Kuchta says. On the executive floor where his office is, the spectrum of styles ranges from quiet to animated.

"We're certainly not clones of one another," he says.

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