

It Takes a Community

How some organizations are regaining a sense of purpose.

By Neal Chalofsky and Mary Gayle Griffin
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A number of recent movements in the workplace have focused on a concern for the human in the organization and a reaction against the priority of profits over people.

Jim Collins and Jerry R. Porras pointed out in *Built to Last* that businesses need profit, just as humans need air. Profit is what organizations need to function in an economic system, but it's not a goal of a business enterprise. The most successful organizations have mission statements that refer to the quality of their products or services, their value to the customer, and their employee-friendly workplaces.

According to Stanford University organizational professor, Jeffrey Pfeffer, companies that treat people well will reap the rewards of high productivity and low turnover. Companies that treat people poorly experience the opposite. Creating a good work environment is considered a legitimate part of an organization's mission. And, in fact, a good workplace can enhance an organization's ability to produce a profit. But a great workplace also sees profit as a means to enhance employee's work life. Organizations that foster this *work life culture* tend to be ones that are seen as workplace communities, evolving into a new integrated paradigm of the individual, the work, the workplace, and society.

For this article, representatives from ten companies that received *Work Life Culture* awards were interviewed. These companies had been honored for their efforts to transform and bring a sense of community back to the workplace. Here is a summary of some of the author's findings:

- An overwhelming alignment between the organizations' missions and their commitment to employees, customers, suppliers, and community was proof of a strong value-based culture in each of the organizations.
- Employee development was embedded in each culture.
- A strong employee focus was a consistent theme among the award winners. One interviewee noted, "*If you treat employees as if they make a difference to the company, they will make a difference to the company.*" Most of the companies interviewed conduct periodic internal work life audits.
- These organizations are led by executives and managers that live the culture. An overall feeling exists that if you want to be a successful manager, you must model the organization's values.
- Empowerment and integrity went hand-in-hand with pride in these organizations. One interviewee commented, "*You [the employee] create your own destiny and carve out your individual path. You are the driver and the firm is here to help.*" The emphasis is on intrinsic motivation and trusting people to do a good job. These organizations hire talented people, give them a mission they can be proud of, and then get out of their way. That's called trust.
- Employees find their work to be meaningful, and they believe in the mission of the organization. They enjoy socializing with their colleagues because they feel they're all in it together.
- The sense of community and social responsibility is overwhelming.

Conclusions from the research with these ten companies:

It's not about the perks; it's about the culture. Employees aren't at an organization just because it has great benefits. The benefits are a result of the work life culture because the culture values employees. In turn, employees have an overwhelming commitment to their organizations. It's all intertwined and synergistic.

The organization supports the person and the person supports the organization. While no organization can be all things to all people, these organizations work hard to recognize and support employees' work, family, leisure, personal, and community needs. Their leaders know that if they provide work life balance opportunities, then the whole employee can focus on his or her work. Again, it's all interconnected.

The organization truly is a community. When you go to work each day knowing that what you do makes a difference, that your voice is heard, that your work is meaningful, and that you enjoy the company of your colleagues, then you truly are part of a workplace community. You have ownership of the mission because you are proud to be associated with the organization. Work and life connect in a new way - within the workplace.

The *Great Places to Work Institute* has concluded that the following five elements make an organization a great place to work:

- Credibility
- Respect
- Fairness
- Pride
- Camaraderie

The organizations interviewed have the same values, but those values aren't just listed on a mission statement. They're lived every day.

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