

## *8 Steps to Creating a Great Workplace Culture for Employees*

You may read about companies that look great from the outside and perhaps they are, but sometimes that's just the cover of the book. One company that I interviewed with had the best website and the job sounded like a dream job. The company had colorful murals all over the walls, a beer tap in the breakroom, the supervisor sat in a glass-walled office so you could always find her, and I just loved the appearance of a great work culture.

When I actually went to my interview, it was still all right, though I noticed a few things that made me wonder right away. The boss did sit in a glass-walled office and all the employees sat at open desks scattered around a large room. Everyone could see everyone. The desks were very close together and the noise was incredible. I thought it would be hard to take a phone call or concentrate. The breakroom had the promised beer tap and an enormous refrigerator filled with snacks and sodas. No vending machines were in sight so I assumed everything was even free to employees. What I wondered about was why the breakroom was completely empty. The tables were all clean and the floor was vacuumed. Why weren't there people enjoying the great breakroom?

Later I had a chance to speak with some employees who were sitting outside. They laughed when I mentioned some of my questions. They told me that the place wasn't horrible or anything, but it wasn't perfect. They admitted that it was really loud to work in the big open office and that sometimes it was complicated if you needed to talk on the phone with your doctor or a client asked you why someone was laughing loudly in the background. The breakroom was super nice, but it was off limits except during special parties. It was mainly there for the executive staff and for appearances. The beer tap hadn't worked for as long as they could remember, not that they thought they'd get much done if they were drinking all day.

It really made me think about what makes a great workplace culture. I had worked in some great places myself and had also been a supervisor at a couple of places where we had to turn away applicants. Some of the best places I knew of didn't have murals or fancy breakrooms. So what did they have? The real secret to creating a great workplace culture for employees is a lot simpler than a pretty workspace and a nice website.

## 1. Make Employees Feel Wanted no Matter their Position

One of my first jobs was at a place that had a fairly large staff. It was a busy office and many clients had to come and go. During the day you would encounter staff who were taking out trash, secretaries and admin assistants, warehouse employees in coveralls, low-level supervisors, accountants, mid-level managers, and executives. Everyone always had a smile for you, no matter who you ran into. People were happy to be there.

When I thought about why they were happy, I remembered how much everyone was constantly reminded of their value. There were small daily and weekly meetings that were just among teams, but at least six times a year, the company would throw a big event and every single employee was invited and paid to for their time to be there. I had worked for other companies that did events like that once a year, but this place was amazing. I don't think it was necessary to have them that often, but it was what they did with that time that mattered. They didn't pay a lot for the space and there wasn't any fancy catered meal at those all-employee events. There were simple refreshments and not a lot else. What was so important about the events was that the CEO would get up in front of everyone and talk about how much value he placed on every employee at the company. He would call out a few specific people at every event. He always chose from the lowest paid workers to the top and made sure no group was missed. The events didn't last long so no one had to be away from anything important for long, but if they wanted to attend they could go and hear about how great they were. It really made every person feel wanted. I think that was one of the things that really contributed to the good attitude encountered at work every day.

## 2. It's Worth the Cost to Provide Perks

Perks are important. What you have to remember is that perks don't mean the same thing at every business. That place I mentioned that trips, bowling and probably spent a mint on perks, even if they were stingy about letting people use them. If a company is big enough and is growing fast, it may be worth it to have fancy perks. I've seen them all, from daycare centers to four thousand dollar massage chairs to paid dining facilities. I've also seen and paid for some perks that were far less expensive but just as effective given the location.

I used to work for a small college and we didn't have a huge budget, certainly not for perks. When I first started to work there, I was in charge of a small staff of two full-time employees and five part-time employees. We were set up in a side room from the library and we kept a collection of items that weren't regular library items but were available for checkout. We had all kinds of things from plastic body parts for students to study to boxes filled with fossils. It was a fun environment in its own way.

One problem was that other than our fun checkout items, the workplace was dull and lifeless. The supervisor who had been there before hadn't been a great match for the job and the staff said that working for him was miserable. He was unhappy to be there and aspired to greater things, so he just didn't care. There was a small back room filled with broken items and furniture that had never been discarded, everything was dusty and the employees had been dealt with strictly. They had to have their coffee at home and go to the library vending machines for snacks. They couldn't bring any food or drinks back with them, so their 10-minute breaks barely gave them time to down a bag of chips or use the restroom.

I spoke with the group and asked what they would like to see done differently. Together we came up with a plan and everyone agreed to pitch in a little bit to fun to improve our workspace. A few volunteered to stay late one night and throw out all the junk from the back room and clean up the place. Once we had some space, we repaired a table and some chairs and set them up in the now-empty room. We bought ourselves a regular 12-cup coffee pot and a small microwave and set them up in the back. I extended their break times to 15 minutes, but also allowed them to rotate out and take some time for themselves in the back room as long as we had coverage for checkouts.

Now and then I would spend my own money to buy something to improve our space, and others began to come up with ideas or bring things in as well. Within a year we had a comfortable and happy workspace, a mini-fridge stocked with iced tea and cold water, and some lamps set up to brighten up the place. I found out later that before I arrived, employee turn-over had been high. I received an award later on for having the highest part-time employee retention rate at the college. It was well worth spending a little of my own money to have a happy staff who came in early on their own just to enjoy each other's company and a good place to work. The perks were small, but they mattered.

### 3. Be as Flexible as Possible Given the Workplace Requirements

It's very common for workplaces to become rigid. Things work for them a certain way for a long time and they get stuck in a rut. Sometimes they know that other similar businesses have the same policies or routines and they just follow suit. An employee might approach a supervisor and ask about a flexible schedule. Perhaps the employee has a school-age child and would like to come in early but be home before school gets out. The employer explains that everyone at the company works the same schedule, from 8 am to 5 pm. The employee hires someone for after-school care but later quits to find a job with better hours.

This doesn't always mean that the boss meant to be mean or rigid. In some cases, they literally just don't think about it. In other cases, they worry that if they make a change, everyone will expect it and cause a problem. In reality, this rarely happens. Some places have to have set hours because of opening and closing times or because of supervisory presence. This is understandable and it may be something that can be adjusted or it may not. In many cases, though, it's just a matter of thinking the situation through. If an employee asks for a flexible schedule and the boss realizes that he comes in early every day anyway, there might not be a reason to say no. Perhaps the boss likes working early when it's quiet, but one employee arriving early isn't likely to be a burden. There may be plenty of coverage for the afternoon already. So, try it! If you have to tell the employee that it's a trial basis in case everyone wants to come in early, that's fine. You may find out that it works out great.

Flexibility on all kinds of minor issues can be a huge benefit. One employee might prefer one thirty minute break over two fifteen minute breaks. Being flexible is a great way to keep employees happy and build a great workplace culture.

#### 4. Encourage Employees to Get to Know Each Other

I had a friend who worked at a quiet office and on her face day, no one even spoke to her except for her boss. She didn't have many duties at first either. She told me that she sat there bored most of the day and surfed the internet. As the days passed, I asked her if it was getting better. She told me that it was. The woman sitting at the desk next to her had begun to say "hello" in the morning and they had exchanged pleasantries. Later on, I asked again how things were going. She said it hadn't really changed that much. It wasn't that people were unfriendly. It was a busy office and people tended to hurry in right on time and hurry out when the day was over. There wasn't really anywhere to eat lunch on the premises so people either ate while they worked at their desks or they went out. She wasn't unhappy working there, but it wasn't the greatest workplace culture.

It's important for employees to have opportunities to get to know each other. When people make acquaintances or even friends at work, they are usually more interested in being there. Some supervisors are hesitant to encourage "fraternizing" since they are afraid that jobs won't get done. It's really important to remember that a happy workplace is usually a more productive workplace.

It's true that there have to be limits sometimes. I've walked into a store where several employees were chatting with each other and no one offered me any help. That means the supervisor isn't paying enough attention and isn't doing a great job. It doesn't mean that every time employees become friends, they will stop doing their jobs.

You can encourage a good workplace culture by offering opportunities for employees to socialize. If possible, give them space where they can take breaks or lunches together. If that's not possible, have birthday parties for employees and clear off a desk and celebrate with cake. Offer social events during off-hours if you can. They don't have to be elaborate. Send out an announcement that a group will be eating at a nearby restaurant at 7. Let people know that they need to respond by a set time so you can plan for a table. Even if only a few show up, it's an opportunity. You may have to think about what is right for your own workplace but find a way.

Another way that you can combine socializing and rewarding employees for good work is to have little ceremonies for rewards. One of my first jobs was as a high-school student and all the employees were young. The boss would give out play money if someone did something very well. About once a week, there would be a little "auction" and employees could use their "money" to buy coupons for an extra break or some company swag.

## 5. Have an Open Door Policy (even if your real door is closed)

A boss doesn't need to have a glass-walled office to be accessible. I had one boss who was very approachable and usually had his office door cracked or open. He encouraged anyone to come talk anytime. He also had a very hard time doing payroll. On the day before payroll was due, he knew that he tended to make mistakes if he didn't concentrate, and payroll was critical. He would close his office door and hang up the "payroll emergency" sign on his door, which was kind of an inside joke for the employees. We all wanted to be paid, too, though. We protected his privacy for him on that day and would rush to help anyone who approached his door. We only knocked if there was a very good reason.

If you are honest with your employees about what you want and how you feel, they will usually be happy to accommodate. At the same time, they feel like they can be honest with you and tell you if something needs attention. That brings us to our next point!

## 6. Ask Questions if you see even a Hint of a Problem

You get many advantages when you are open with your employees. You will know them better and they will know you better. They will also be aware that you are willing to talk and listen. It really helps create a great workplace culture.

A key to keeping that culture is to keep an eye on what is happening around you. If you know that your employee, Jan, is usually really attentive when the phone rings, you will notice if she seems off one day. She completely misses a call. Since you've encouraged open communication in the workplace, it won't be unusual for you to ask questions. You may find out that Jan isn't feeling well or she has a problem at home. It may be that it's best to give her some time off and let someone fill in. It may turn out that it's actually a work-related problem. Maybe an employee from another department said something to Jan that was insensitive. It may not be big enough to do anything specific about it, but it may be that she just needs a word of encouragement.

## 7. Be Honest About Your Needs

It's very easy for a boss to become employee-centered and take a lot on themselves, especially good ones! The issue is that if you do have a problem, you may make mistakes or be critical to an employee when you didn't intend to.

Talk with your employees about your own life, up to a point. It isn't necessary to reveal everything about yourself, but transparency is important. If you have a bad headache but you have to be at work for a meeting, let your employees know that you need some quiet time or maybe even time to close your door and be in a dark and cool place for a while. You have created an excellent workplace culture and they will respect you.

If you have been working too hard or had issues at home, you may be at the point where you actually need a real break. Some supervisors feel guilty about asking someone to cover for them to take some vacation time. Some take pride in never using vacation time. In the long run, though, it doesn't benefit you or your employees. If you need a break, take one! Explain to your staff that it's time for you to get away and they will support you.

## 8. Be a Best Boss, but not a Best Friend

Although it is important to be honest with your staff, that doesn't mean that you become their best friend. This can definitely lead to more problems instead of solutions. Do tell your employees about your hobbies, your family, and your pets. Don't tell your employees about your therapist, your relationship problems, or how much you dislike another employee in the office.

Being personable is good, but being overly personable will get you into trouble. Employees who see you as their best friends may take advantage of you, or at least try. They may discuss your private concerns with others. You do want to get to know your employees, but you won't usually know them so well that you can tell them those intimate details about your life.

If you use the steps outlined here to create a great workplace culture, your employees will naturally like you as a boss, even if you aren't their best friend. That is what is important, that there is mutual respect.