

High-Level Happiness

How Atlantic Canada's top employers are attracting great managers—and keeping them.

By Sarah Sawler

We've all heard the phrase "If Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." And since pretty much everyone has experienced a mother's wrath at one time or another, most of us would agree with that sentiment. Well, it turns out that business works the same way, with executives and upper management playing the role of the proverbial mama. Kent Lane, director of Corporate Affairs and Technology for CBCL Limited, puts it like this: "Think about how laughter is contagious. Because we have a group of happy, contented leaders, high morale is infectious in the same way."

According to Lane, strength, respectfulness, skill, and a solid understanding of core values are all non-negotiable characteristics of good upper management. But in an environment where highly skilled, experienced executives are hard to find, it's challenging to attract them and it's even tougher to get them to stay. The key? Keeping them happy.



Perks, perks and more perks

Attracting and retaining great managers and executives isn't just about the paycheck. As recruiters become increasingly competitive, companies have begun offering extra incentives to candidates, including continuing education programs and flexible benefits packages. At CBCL, an employee-owned multi-disciplinary engineering and environmental consulting firm with offices throughout Atlantic Canada, employees are given the opportunity to become personally invested in the company by purchasing shares. Executives are given advanced benefits and a more valuable pension plan than regular employees—both of which act as incentives for people to move up the ranks.

Although DeltaWare Systems offers some of these things too, president Vince McKenna places his focus on creating a “fun atmosphere” by holding frequent family-friendly functions and initiating community involvement with events like the DeltaWare Fun Run, which raises money for hospices.

From its office in Charlottetown, P.E.I., this e-health and e-business technology solutions provider has also recently developed a program that allows executives who are close to retirement to move into consulting roles. “It’s a more strategic use of senior resources,” says McKenna. “It’s a slower step into retirement that allows the company to benefit from continued support at the senior level. It also keeps the team intact and allows for a more gradual shift (in leadership).”

Listen up

Although most people want to feel like they have some kind of impact on their organization, CBCL takes it to a whole new level. Not only do managers and executives have open-door access to the president and CFO, they frequently hold meetings where executives can voice their opinions. Because those executives often become shareholders, these meetings give them the chance to influence the direction of the company and the value of their own investments. “The owners and the executives of this team are the ones who guide the company,” says Lane. “The CEO is very open to the ideas of others, almost to a fault.”

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Kent Lane, director of Corporate Affairs and Technology CBCL Limited



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Lighten Up

Source Security's innovative approach to mobilizing the troops

Picture a lone security guard standing in a courtroom in Toronto. A mobile response team patrolling an industrial site. Event staff keeping the crowd under control at a music festival in Vancouver. Now imagine trying to make these people care about an organization with offices they've never even seen. This was the challenge that the executives of Source Security were facing when they sat down to a two-day strategic planning session last year. With a goal of generating \$1.5 million of new business revenue, they had to find a way to engage their employees.

The result was Operation Vacation, an inventive initiative based on *Spy vs. Spy*. They sent out about 1,000 T-shirts, one for every employee, with a set of rules. Employees were asked to send the Operation Vacation team the name of a local security company in their area and the contact information for one of their competitor's clients. For each piece of information, employees would receive a ballot to win an iPhone 5. If the company met the goal of \$1.5 million in new business, the names of participating employees would be entered in another draw—for a trip to Cancun. The company

experienced an incredible return on investment; they met their goal at the cost of 1,000 T-shirts, a trip and three iPhones. Source Security now runs new "engagement" initiatives every quarter.

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It's not just the individual security staff who benefit from the culture at Source. "At the executive level, everyone's mandated to work from home for a half a day a week," says Ron Lovett, CEO of Source Security. "It's so they can do their laundry. Clean up their backyard. I don't

care what they do, I just don't want them to be around here for a half a day a week." For Lovett, doing a great job isn't about doing the time—it's about productivity. He doesn't mind his employees taking the afternoon off for a yoga class because he knows that if there's a deadline, they'll be in the office until late that night.

Lately, Lovett's been seeing eyes light up when he tells job candidates what the company's all about. According to him, their desire to be a part of the Source culture often takes precedence over everything else. He's been making these changes in an effort to create a culture that promotes "having fun and taking your job seriously, but not yourself." So far, staff reactions have been overwhelmingly positive.

Lovett also says that they're seeing a notable difference in the overall function of the company because of their new engagement initiatives. Their employees are happier, resulting in improved service levels. Because their service levels are better, their clients are happier. And when clients are happier, Source gets more business and pay rates go up. In a company where employees are engaged, everyone wins.

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Grow Your Own Executives

Despite the seemingly obvious value in training employees and promoting from within, many Canadian companies are still struggling to find outside employees with built-in skills. Lane attributes some of CBCL’s success to internal promotion: “I think the reason that our executives make the right decisions is because they have the knowledge and the experience of the business. It also increases everyone else’s morale because people trust them.”

McKenna agrees. For the past five years, DeltaWare has proactively focused on a succession plan that gives promising employees increased responsibility, better projects and access to an excellent training program. In fact, McKenna says that DeltaWare rarely brings management in from outside—a win-win situation for DeltaWare and its people. The company gets tried-and-true executives with knowledge of the company while executives and managers get the opportunity to grow their skills and talent within a supportive environment.

At CBCL and DeltaWare, their efforts are working. Not only are both companies considered top Atlantic Canadian employers, their retention levels speak volumes. And although they’ve occasionally had to hire recruiters, neither has lost an executive or upper manager to a headhunter for over eight years. “We’ve had people tell us that they’ve been contacted, but they have no desire to go,” says Lane. “I think that’s part of our success. We keep a good core of individuals who stay with us, respect the company and grow over time.” DeltaWare also boasts low turnover, with retention levels in the 80-90 per cent range. According to McKenna, it’s because they’ve put in the time and the planning to keep their management happy and emotionally invested. | ABM

OUR THOUGHTS ON MEETINGS

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