

Focus on Your Employees

by Jon Craighead

Every year Fortune Magazine publishes a list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For. As I read this year's list I decided it would be interesting to find the commonalities shared by these honored organizations. Two remarkable facts stood out for me: First, most of the companies are currently hiring people. In fact 79 of the 100 companies are hiring despite the current economic environment. Second, each of these companies' primary focus is on their employees – not the customers. This occurs as oxymoronic to one such as me who has always insisted that our eye should be on the customer. But wait, maybe the way to ultimately focus on the customer is to focus first on the employee. This insight brought to mind a familiar phrase: *Take care of your people and they'll take care of the job*. It makes perfect sense, doesn't it? How often are we willing to throw employees under the bus to appease our customers? Can we expect our people to gleefully and graciously serve our customers when they have no sense of being served themselves?

Not surprisingly, all of the 100 companies are extremely successful and profitable. But to simply say that they are employee oriented would be an understatement. The amenities they offer range from childcare, valet parking, full pay maternity leave, gold plated healthcare, expansive exercise facilities, pay packages with generous bonuses, time allotted to do community volunteering, flexible hours, telecommuting, generous rewards for time and service, and more. This goes against the grain of the more typical practice of providing generous compensation for a selected few and downsizing to insure profitability, with little regard to the long term impact on the company and its people. What kind of leaders would take such an unorthodox approach to management? I'd like to explore this conundrum with you and see where we end up. First, let's establish an *a priori*: after the hierarchy of basic needs such as food, shelter, and money, something motivates us humans even more. I suggest that something is in the category of living a useful and/or purposeful life. So then, how can the workplace be a source of a useful and purposeful life?

One possible solution is a *Values Resolution Process* – that is, a set of creative, innovative, and imperative operational values that are agreed upon by the entire workforce. In this process personnel at all levels of the organization make a personal commitment to represent the values in their role within the company. The values then become a system representing the workforce's pledge as to how the company is known in the business world and the community. It is the responsibility of everyone in the

organization to insure that the values are the guiding force to a way of being. This is the company's brand and remains as such unless or until the values are amended or changed by the entire workforce. The key fundamentals of this process are transparency, accountability, and trust.

Further examination of these 100 companies reveals a consistent pattern of management's covenant with its people. This covenant provides an environment where the workforce, in partnership with management, concentrates solely on the success of the customer. This results not only in excellent service but a continuum of innovative products and services as a result of listening carefully for the customer's needs. This in turn creates success and profitability which gets shared with the workforce and provides resources to develop new goods and services, which then strengthens the viability of the enterprise. Ultimately the team is freed from concerns about their own welfare, which allows them an unrestrained commitment to fulfill the mission of the enterprise. This then becomes an ongoing circle of success, which is undoubtedly why these companies appear on Fortune's list year after year.

Managers and leaders who see themselves as stewards of a system of stated values choose responsibility over entitlement and hold themselves accountable to those they manage. Personnel who experience the satisfaction of service to others enjoy knowing their work makes a difference and enhances efficacy. Organizations that commit to this level of service consistently succeed in their marketplace. This collaboration of teamwork throughout the enterprise is the very essence of what has sustained our great nation for decades. We face many challenges, but when I hear the hype and uncertainty about our future as a nation, I find it very reassuring to read about such enterprises which are leading the way for greatness and success.