

Building a Positive, Upbeat & Productive Company Culture

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Outside the Lines, Inc.



Anyone in the service industry knows how important customers are. They pay your paycheck and allow you to continue offering products and services. Without them, you wouldn't have a business. But what about the people who serve your customers? Your employees are your internal customers. Without them, you would be hard pressed to run your business! For the sake of your internal customers, maintaining a positive, upbeat workplace is critical.

Building a great company culture starts in two places, which are virtually inseparable –first with the people you choose to populate your organization and then with the leadership and atmosphere of the organization. Let's start with your employees, themselves.

It is impossible to run any type of service establishment by yourself.... At least for very long that is! You need hard-working, well trained professionals who can help carry out the duties and responsibilities necessary to running your business. You must start by hiring the right kind of

people. Working in the service industry is not technically difficult. You aren't asking your employees to perform brain surgery, but you are asking them to set aside their personal needs for a period of time and provide top notch attention and service to your customers. Not everyone is capable of doing that.

There's no shame in the fact that not all people are created to be service professionals. You can

train your employees to carry out just about any task but you can't train them to have a service oriented attitude. They need to come with that. So you truly need to focus on staffing your organization with people who have

an innate customer service spirit. Locating and hiring this sort of person does wonders for the positive climate within your company. People who can carry out your customers' needs with ease make life easier all around. Once you have found and hired them, then you need to provide them with the tools and motivation to maintain a stellar work environment. This is where positive leadership takes over.



"Leadership" is a popular term business experts like to banter around with all kinds of complicated significance. However, in its basic meaning leadership is pretty much about guidance. Its about making decisions for your organization that treat your employees with as much importance as you treat your customers and about modeling appropriate behavior for your staff. Good leadership starts off on the right foot with new employees. Let's look at starting off the right way with your staff from day one.

Once you have hired great people to work for you, you have to educate them appropriately. Perhaps you've hired someone who has a good deal of experience in your specific business. You are confident that they can hit the ground running. You still need to provide them with the rules and expectations that are particular to your company. You can't take it for granted that they will perform exactly how you expect. You must be consistent and thorough in how and what you communicate to new employees. On the other hand, you may have hired someone who has a fantastic attitude but not as much technical skill in



your type of business. You have more to teach them in terms of training, and they will have a learning curve, but ultimately your goal is for all of your staff to end up on roughly the same level in their ability to perform to

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your expectations.

In a nutshell, your goal with a new hire is to: 1) assess the skills/knowledge/experience they come with, if you didn't already fully accomplish this in the hiring process; 2) provide comprehensive hands on training to fill in gaps in their skills/knowledge/experience; 3) get them up to speed on the rules and policies specific to your organization; and 4) clearly explain your expectations as they relate your employee's job responsibilities. It certainly sounds like a tall order and it is. But on the flip side, imagine the back tracking and re-hiring you may subject yourself to if you don't take

care of all this up front.

Once you have your employees up to speed on what their job entails, how your organization runs, it's time to set them loose. This is a scary concept for many managers and business owners. But if you have hired the right people, given them good training and clearly explained your expectations, they should be ready to serve your customers exceptionally. But leadership still can't take a back seat. Good leaders who are intent on building and maintaining a positive, upbeat and productive company culture



are busy doing a multitude of other important things while their employees are serving the guests.

Without exception, it is important to establish credibility and trust. Employees need to know that you are a trustworthy and credible leader and also that you trust them to do their job. Consistency is a big piece of this equation. When every employee knows that you consistently want to see a certain behavior from them on a daily basis and that you won't

let anyone slide, they can be comfortable in knowing what you expect. Along the same lines is being a good role model. Credibility and trust in you also stems from your employees knowing you won't ask them to do anything you wouldn't personally do. When they see you modeling the same behavior you expect from them, they know there are no double standards and you will earn their respect.

Trust and credibility are also earned and exchanged by letting them do what they are supposed to do. In other words, avoid micromanaging your staff; instead strive to work with them. While more hands on management of new employees or struggling employees may be necessary, avoid hovering over your employees while they work. When you show your staff that you trust them to do the things you have asked them to do, you create an environment of confidence and reliability. When you work alongside them, doing those same things, you create an environment of credibility and consistency.

Additionally, when you work alongside your employees, you create a sense of teamwork and give your staff a certain level of comfort in your role as their leader. By no means is it sug-

gested that you become friends with your employees or blur the lines between boss and subordinate, but your staff is more likely to work hard for you when they know something about you and feel comfortable around you. Leaders who are visible in the

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workplace, and spend time interacting with their staff, reinforce the common bond of providing exceptional service.

The next ingredient here is to create open communication within your business. Many companies have something called an “Open Door Policy” – rules and guidelines for employees to openly communicate with management. That kind of seems like an oxymoron. After all, if your organization has open communication why do you need a policy governing it? Employees have little trust in an “Open Door Policy” that seems more like rhetoric than an actual expectation. A policy of open communication is

enforced more by actions than by policies and rules. Basically, by interacting with your employees, creating credibility and trust and regularly letting them know that you are open to their questions, suggestions and comments you are creating an environment of open communication. There's nothing wrong with having an “Open Door Policy” in writing but you need to consistently uphold it with your own visible communication.

Good communication is one of the most important aspects to a superior employment relationship. It is also one of the most difficult to master and the most often overlooked. If you are not a successful communicator or you find yourself struggling to consistently maintain two-way communication with your employees, there are many different kinds of effective training available to improve your communication skills. However, from a day-to-day perspective, the best way to build a standard of communication is to practice! It may feel awkward, but com-



munication experts suggest that you schedule “visibility and communication time” with your employees until it becomes second nature to you. What they mean by this is to create some type of calendar reminder for yourself to interact daily with your employees. This doesn’t mean just talking with them when you are doling out assignments or discussing problems but rather supporting the idea of an “Open Door Policy” on a consistent and sincere basis.

Employees who feel comfortable communicating with their superiors are more likely to provide good service in a natural and unforced way. They tend to be more confident

and trust themselves to do what is right for your customers because they know their superiors trust them. Another important element to good communication is that your task related expectations will come across more clearly to your employees when you have regular, quality dialogue with them. When you get to know your employees through

regular exchanges you will find that they all will have differing styles of taking direction. This is the next component of employee communication.

It’s not enough to simply communicate, you must also be able to customize your communication as necessary. This doesn’t require an advanced degree in



psychology but rather good observation skills. As you interact with your employees you will probably notice that some are very rules driven – they ask lots of questions to ensure they are performing tasks correctly. They may want to write instructions down the first time they get them. Other employees

may be rather intuitive – various tasks and expectations will seem to come naturally to them. Some employees will be very extroverted and talkative. Others may be more reserved. Some are very chore focused and others are focused more on interpersonal activity.

By trial and error you may al-

ready know that you get different results from an employee depending on how you talk with them. Take a little time to analyze what kind of communication style you use: for example, are you direct and to the point? Or do you spend a little time on small talk before you get to the point with someone? If you are very direct, you should understand that employees may feel slighted if you don’t at least ask how they are doing before you launch into a complex assign-

“ Examine your interaction with your guests versus your interaction with your employees.”

ment. Of course it is important to treat your staff equitably and ensure you aren’t interpreted as playing favorites in the way that you interact with each of them.

Another way to look at the concept of communication with your employees is to really contemplate the idea that they are your internal customers. Examine your interaction with your guests versus your interaction with your employees. Do your guests get friendly, polite contact, while your employees get the brunt of

whatever mood you are in? Do you spend time chatting with your guests and more time avoiding your employees? Certainly customers deserve your respect and deference; as noted you wouldn’t have a business without them. But employees also deserve your focus; since you need them to keep your customers! When you show your employees that you value them as much as your external customers, you create a positive and productive atmosphere. Likewise, when you show that you respect your staff through effective communication, they will return the sentiment both to you and your customers.

Once you have embraced the importance of communication and put some thought into how you communicate, you must focus on what to communicate to your employees. Again, consistency is the key. Ensure you are communicating the same things to all employees. And ensure they are all interpreting your communication the same way. When you are swamped with responsibilities it is easy to forget that employees are not mind readers. Even when you are busy you have to take the time out to spell out your expectations thoroughly and effectively. This is particularly important when an

employee is new or is in a new position. Also carefully consider the delegation of information and task dissemination. It is unreasonable to expect that you will always be the one to communicate tasks or pass information on to your staff. There will be times when you will have to ask someone else to do so; it might be a group/team leader, another

the concept of “inspecting what you expect”. Consistent with maintaining dependable expectations is the idea that you must follow up on tasks and assignments you have asked your employees to complete. This creates a system of checks and balances not only for employee accountability but also for the quality of your own communication.



Inspecting what you expect is about follow up and not micromanaging your employees. Following up on what you have assigned speaks volumes – employees will have a sense of urgency in getting tasks ac-

complished. They will also be more likely to ask questions and have more of a quality focus when they know you plan to check their work. Inspecting what you expect also increases the quality of your customer service, since lax expectations tend to end up in front of the customer and affect their opinion of your business.

member of management or simply another employee. Clarity and thoroughness in your instructions will increase the odds that they will get passed along in the same way.

We've already explored the idea of consistent expectations. But it's worth mentioning that your expectations should also be consistent across your entire staff. It is unacceptable to have a certain level of expectation with one employee, yet let another employee slide. Which leads to

Once you have established good communication with your employees and they know what is expected of them, you need to give them consistent, quality

feedback on their work performance. This can simply be seen as ongoing communication but should also include rewards and consequences for their behavior. In a nutshell you should regularly discuss their progress and performance with them and either reward excellence, tackle problems or question mediocrity.

Rewarding excellence doesn't necessarily mean giving raises or tangible perks. But it does mean recognizing a job well done. Managers often mistakenly believe that if they compliment an employee too often, they will become complacent and fail to work harder. This couldn't be farther from the truth! Most employees are motivated by the knowledge that they have done a good job and that it has been noticed by someone of importance. Particularly in service industries, where many staff members tend to extroverted, employees enjoy a little public recognition when they exhibit consistently high performance.

Rewarding excellence also sets the standard for other employees, whether they are new or working on improving their performance. Making a point to share and celebrate positive customer comments and feedback is a great way to illustrate spe-

cific acts of excellence. As a manager or business owner, you also have the advantage of “catching” employees doing something right. Observing such behavior gives you a chance to share real world stories with your staff in order to exemplify exceptional performance. You may consider some type of reward program for employees who consistently provide excellent or perform above organization standards. It can be something simple and doesn't have to eat into your profits. Perhaps it is additional time off, the chance to choose a choice shift or even the use of company services at a free or discounted rate.

You should additionally strive to reward your staff from the team perspective. By creating excitement and fun in the workplace, you make work enjoyable for your staff as well as for your cus-



tomers. As you surely know, customer service isn't always easy but it is a noble profession. People who choose to make their career in hospitality do so because they enjoy serving others. No matter how formal or informal your service focus is, there is always room for laughter and fun amongst your team. Creating an atmosphere where teamwork and camaraderie thrive both behind the scenes and in front of your customers will make your employees excited to come to work.

Having fun and excitement at work doesn't need to be complicated. For instance, your employee break area should be comfortable and inviting. And maybe you can let your employees contribute to the décor, within reason – let them bring in photos or some other personal element to make the area more relaxing. Allowing your staff to come up with appropriate activities outside of work is another option for bringing fun to your company. Bowling leagues, softball teams and reading groups are good old favorites. Your staff can probably come up with lots of other creative suggestions for fun inside and outside the workplace. Studies show that employees are most unhappy in rigid, dour workplaces where there is no sign of their individuality.

Even a company that requires strict uniform adherence or formal service guidelines doesn't need to be harsh and gloomy! The point here is to allow your staff some flexibility and, in moderation, let them dictate what makes a fun workplace.

On the other hand, we don't live in a perfect world so there will certainly be times when your employees or teams fail to do things right or simply operate in a mediocre way. While it is critical to always be on the lookout for great performance, it is important to your bottom line to stay on top of poor performance. It is frustrating to have to deal with an employee who isn't giving service that is in line with your standards or performing a task as you have expected. And even more so in the service industry since poor performance ultimately affects your customers, which in turn affects your profit. However, remember that the average employee doesn't come to work with the intention of doing a bad job. And when you need to address perform-

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ance shortcomings, it is essential that you criticize the problem or problem behavior and not the person.

There are a multitude of reasons why an employee doesn't perform well. They may just be having an “off” day. They may not have the tools or information they need. They may not be cut out for your business or industry. Regardless of the reason or rea-



sons for the poor performance, you will have a “make it or break it” moment with that employee, and possibly other staff members, depending on how you address your concerns. Again, you want to tackle the problem and not the person. You will want to address problems in a respectful manner and do so confidentially. You certainly don't want the rest of your staff, as well as customers, looking on as you point out a performance inadequacy to an employee.

You are also likely to have employees who aren't stellar performers but also don't really do anything wrong. They are the poster children for mediocrity. They tend to frustrate your high performers and provide a poor example for your lower performers. You also run the risk of dragging your organization's morale down by not doing anything about them. This is where we utilize the idea of questioning

mediocrity. Everyone has the possibility of being second-rate at some point in the work day. Regularly ask your employees about the choices they make and the work habits they exemplify. Ask them to question themselves.

The questions in everyone's mind, including your own, should always be “could I have done that better?” or “is that the very best I can do for our guests?” By creating an atmosphere where everyone is always asking how they can raise the bar, and potentially “one-up” their own performance, your mediocre employees will step up to the plate or weed themselves out.

Just like with everything else, consistency is important when

rewarding excellence, tackling problems and questioning mediocrity. It is vital that you maintain trust and credibility by treating all employees the same. If someone does something great, regardless of their past performance, you should recognize it. Likewise, if a normally stellar employee performs poorly, you must tackle the situation. You can't let someone slide just be-



cause they usually are great. And no one, not even you, should be exempt from being asked whether they could do better!

Acknowledging great and sub-standard performance leads us to the actual rewards and consequences. Some reward examples were already mentioned above. Rewards do not need to be complicated or costly. Most important is that rewards are tailored to meet your employees' needs. If your employee population places a high value on their social and family lives, you may consider some type of time off

program. For instance, a certain customer satisfaction rating may translate into additional days off. Or maybe your employees enjoy luxury and pampering – a great chance to offer your company's services as a reward. Good communication with your staff will lead you to an understanding of what makes them tick. When you interact regularly with your employees, they will give you a wealth of information that can help you create great employee rewards programs. Simply asking your staff, or informally polling them, may also give you some idea of what would be a satisfactory reward. Of course employee motivation isn't solely influenced by perks and rewards. Rewards should merely be complementary to strong workplace practices such as consistency, good communication, clear expectations and solid training.

Consequences are on the other end of the spectrum from rewards. Interestingly, consequences have a lot more to do with creating a productive, upbeat work environment than rewards do. The actual steps you take to handle employees who break the rules or don't perform to your company's expectations will have a direct impact on the morale of your staff. Again, consistency, good communication, clear expectations and solid

training are crucial to ensuring employees feel good about their workplace. When any one of these areas is weak or lacking, employees tend to lose trust in

“ Employees should know that your organization is going to support them...”

you and your organization. Add in the unfortunate need to discipline or terminate one of them, and you may have a serious problem.

When employees have a clear idea of what is expected of them, you are consistent in communicating and following up on your expectations, and they have the tools and training to complete their responsibilities, consequences are a natural part of the job versus a threat. Employees should know that your organization is going to support them in doing their job but fairly and consistently discipline them if they don't meet your expectations. Actual methods of discipline will likely vary by position and severity of the infraction but you must be careful in meting out punishments. Ensure that

you do not violate any state or federal laws, or give the impression that you have, when you handle disciplinary issues.

While there isn't nearly enough room here to get very deeply into Human Resources issues, you must recognize that your actions when dealing with an employee problem may deeply affect the rest of your staff. Particularly when there is the impression that you have not been “above board” in your employee dealings. For instance, suppose you have not done a great job communicating with and training an employee and the rest of your staff can see that. And perhaps the buzz gets around the workplace that you don't like that employee – regardless of whether it's true or not. Imagine that employee's work performance isn't great and you end up firing them. Think about how this may affect the rest of your staff. They may feel that you are unfair, they can't trust you, that you make arbitrary decisions – true or not, it is your employees' perception of your workplace that is reality for them. Their feelings will no doubt



affect their work performance which in turn affects your bottom line.

Now this is not to say that you can't and shouldn't discipline employees. On the contrary, allowing employees who are dead weight to stick around will also negatively impact your organization's morale. But you must carefully consider the big picture when you have to impose negative consequences in your workplace. And you have to be open to your own criticism – ask yourself, have you done everything you can as a manager or employer to ensure your staff will be successful? If your staff isn't performing up to expectations, you may have a morale issue. You have to carefully evaluate what might be missing: Is communication suffering? Is your credibility a problem? Are your employees receiving thorough training? Do they have the tools they need to do their job? Are you being consistent with your rewards and punishments? Analyzing your own actions will lead you to regularly do the right thing when



resorting to negative consequences for your employees.

When you are doing all the right things and communicating well with your employees, you can breathe easy, wouldn't you think? For the most part, absolutely. But be aware that there could be areas of deficiency in your organization or management style that you could be unaware of and your employees may be too tactful to tell you. Or your staff may be generally satisfied so they have not given much thought to workplace improvements. How do you explore these areas? How to you get your employees to give you honest and constructive feedback on their workplace experience? Employee satisfaction surveys, of course!

Outside The Lines, Inc. offers comprehensive, customized employee satisfaction surveys as well as a team of experts who can help you utilize the information you will gather by surveying your staff. Once you have made the decision to conduct an employee satisfaction survey, how should you get started? OTL, Inc. will guide you on the technical aspects of creating and conducting the survey but you should start by informing your staff. Begin by letting your em-

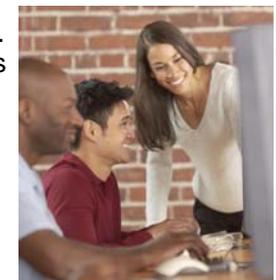


ployees know that you will be surveying them on their opinions about their workplace. Make sure they understand that it will be an anonymous survey and you are soliciting their thoughts in order to maintain continuous improvement in the workplace. Do this at least several days before introducing the survey in order to give your staff time to ask questions and prepare their thoughts. You also want to ensure you create the understanding that you take the survey responses seriously and want them to be honest and thorough in their answers.

When scheduling your survey event, you should typically expect it to take at least a day, for very small organizations, or up to several days to a week for larger organizations. While you don't want the survey to drag on for an excessively long period of time, you also don't want the survey to take away from your company's ability to continue providing excellent customer service! You

will want to ensure all of your employees have an opportunity to participate in the survey. Be sure to take into account part-time employees who may only work a few hours a week – you won't want to forget to include them in the survey process.

While the questionnaire itself shouldn't take a lengthy period of time to complete, employees should be given the time during their work shift to take the survey. This will further emphasize the importance of the survey to you and your organization. They should also understand that the survey is voluntary and that no adverse employment actions will be taken should they decline to complete the survey. While it is frustrating to have a staff member who doesn't want to comply, the vast majority of your employees will be happy to complete a survey. By stressing the anonymity of their survey responses you are likely to gain 100% participation. Naturally, you'll also want to set up some method to ensure privacy while the survey is being completed. Employees are less likely to be honest if they think you, or even a co-



worker, are looking over their shoulder.



A possible suggestion is to set up a temporary workstation or PC with an internet connection in an office or private area when employees can sit down and take the survey. This is helpful in hospitality organizations where employees generally don't utilize PC's as part of their daily work. This will minimize the expectation that employees will take the survey on their home PC's or elsewhere which is undesirable and should only be used as a last resort. Your goal with the survey is obviously to

gain 100% participation, while ensuring confidentiality. By setting up a dependable, easy process at your work location, you can monitor the progress of the survey event without compromising the anonymity of responses.

While employees shouldn't be forced to take the survey, it might be helpful to set up some kind of schedule to lend some organization to the process. A signup sheet or a designated time during each work shift can help maintain order. Employees should be asked to complete the survey "on the clock". Even though it is voluntary, the survey is still an expectation of the workplace and they must be paid for their time. Again, the survey itself is generally brief and shouldn't take up an excessive amount of time from the employee's work day. Some organizations keep track of survey participants by giving each employee a sticker or pin or checking them off of a staff roster once they have completed the questionnaire. Alternately, other organizations have allowed employees to drop their name in a hat for a prize drawing when they have completed the survey. This is sometimes a helpful motivator and tracking method in larger organizations.

Before concluding the survey

period, ensure you give any stragglers an opportunity to get their questionnaire completed. At the conclusion of the survey process, let your staff know that you appreciate their participation and look forward to utilizing their responses to improve their workplace. This is also a good time to reassure them that you will take their feedback seriously. You may also want to prepare them for post-survey expectations. For instance, you might be planning to conduct grass roots meetings or focus groups depending on the outcome of the survey responses. Communicating an expectation of next steps will reassure your staff you plan to address any concerns their responses may have identified.



OTL, Inc. prides itself in fast survey results, so you can count on a quick turnaround once your employees have completed their part. Once you have results – then what?! When you have your survey results in hand, your first step is to analyze themes and percentages. OTL staff experts

will assist you in interpreting your results, but what you are first looking for are high percentages of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Basically, what are your employees most happy about and what do they wish you would change? You will also want to pay attention to topics where your staff seem to be split on their opinions – half satisfied and half dissatisfied. Or, at least a larger percentage of dissatisfaction. This could be a sign of specific groups of your employees being adversely affected by a policy, procedure, a particular member of management, etc.

When you have a good idea of your employees' thoughts, your next step is to act on them. You have a variety of methods in which to do this. In some cases, it may be evident to you what must be done. Perhaps a very specific issue has been brought up and your job will be to investi-

gate and act upon it. Or perhaps your employees are dissatisfied about something in general – maybe your benefits plan or your time off policy. In this instance, you may need additional information. In this case, you may wish to set up focus groups, or grass roots meetings, to get further details and suggestions from your staff.

Much like the survey itself, focus groups are done on company time and in a non-threatening way. Employees may be asked to volunteer or perhaps nominated by their peers. Smaller organizations may be able to include all employees within the focus group. Your goal with a focus group is to present the concerns or issues they have brought up in their questionnaire responses – you should limit it to the top three or so – and solicit possible solutions from your staff. This is a great way to increase your employees' participation in their workplace and illustrate how important their input is. Employee involvement in workplace challenges greatly increases overall satisfaction and improves morale and productivity.

Throughout this e-book, you have surely seen that there are many ways to impact your com-

pany culture and that no one aspect can ensure your success or failure. A positive culture starts with the type of employees you hire and the way to train them. It continues with the kind of credibility you and your management staff create and carries on with the way you handle employee rewards as well as the consequences of poor performance. Additionally, you can take the pulse of your culture by asking your employees what needs improvement and involving them in the solutions.

Overall, you can make your workplace a fun and enjoyable destination. While customer service isn't always easy, it can be very satisfying if your employees enjoy coming to work and feel their hard work is recognized and reciprocated. Always keep in mind that you can't serve your customers without your employees. You won't go wrong by maintaining this focus since the positive results will end up in front of your customers in the long run. Best wishes in creating a positive, upbeat, productive atmosphere at your company! Your employees will thank you!