

Loving Your Work: Practices that Promote Job Satisfaction

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My January, 2009 article addressed the impact that bad bosses had on one's physical and emotional well-being. I received many responses to that article, almost all written by individuals who worked in settings that they experienced as basically noxious and overbearing, settings that offered little, if any, support. Some felt trapped, unable to leave their current job and seek a new position given the current high rate of unemployment. One person reported, "It's hard for me to get up in the morning and go to work. I know I'm going to face a boss who only knows how to criticize and never offers any positive comments. No one smiles or laughs at work. Everyone is anxious and depressed, including myself. If I could find another job I would do so without hesitation."

In contrast to these negative accounts, I recently spoke at a school and had time to chat with a number of staff and faculty. I was impressed with how many of them voiced the sentiment, "I love working here." When I asked what they liked in particular, I heard a variety of replies, including:

"My work is very interesting."

"People really care about you here."

"It's a great feeling to know you're making a difference in kids' lives."

"No one is micromanaging you, something I had in my last job."

"I enjoy walking around the school, it's very comfortable and inviting, especially with the students' art work displayed."

I have been interested for many years in factors that create job satisfaction. Given the sites at which I have done most of my work and consultations, my main focus initially was on school, mental health, and hospital environments. In addition, I would hear about other sites as I conducted therapy with adult patients. During the past decade as I have engaged in an increasing number of consultations and presentations within the corporate and financial worlds, my interests have expanded into these work domains as well. Not

surprisingly, I learned that common factors contribute to job satisfaction across a wide spectrum of work settings.

Top Places to Work

As I described in my January, 2009 article, research supports what we know intuitively, that constantly interacting with a boss who is negative and overbearing is emotionally and physically debilitating. I believe that given the hours we spend at work and how our mood at work easily spills over into our personal lives, it is of paramount importance to identify and then apply at our places of employment those practices that result in job satisfaction. Thus, I was interested to read a recent special magazine produced by *The Boston Globe* titled “Top Places to Work.” The magazine rated the best 100 sites in which to work in Massachusetts based on employee satisfaction and examined what led employees to offer such high marks. The *Globe* divided the different work sites into three categories: Large, Midsize, and Small Employer.

In gathering data, the *Globe* collaborated with Workplace Dynamics, a firm that specializes in employee engagement and retention. More than 160,000 employees were contacted at the 269 organizations that were willing to participate in the survey and approximately 86,000 completed the questionnaire. The rankings were based upon six measures, which included:

Direction: Do employees have confidence in the leader of the organization? Do they believe it operates ethically and is moving in the right direction?

Execution: Do employees believe senior managers have a good understanding of what the company needs to do to succeed, and are they sharing information well?

Managers: Do managers listen to employees, praising superior work and making good use of people’s skills?

Career: Does the organization offer formal training and other opportunities to learn and grow, and does it reward good performance?

Conditions: Is the work environment free from hostility, and does the company help workers to balance career and family life? Does the organization show its appreciation for employees?

Pay and Benefits: Are workers fairly compensated?

Having devoted my January, 2009 article to the impact of bad bosses, I thought it only fitting that I should give equal billing to those managers and companies for whom people want to work. The opening comments in *The Boston Globe* magazine offered by Shirley Leong, the Business Editor, set the tone for the pages that followed. She writes:

If there's one thing the winners of the Globe 100's Top Places to Work have in common, it's this: They all believe it's good business to keep employees satisfied, motivated, and working hard. Show them respect. But in today's economy, when layoffs are more common than bonuses and perks, how do you do that? The best employers know that loyalty is forged during difficult times. How you treat employees now is critical to surviving—and ultimately conquering, we hope—the toughest economy many of us have ever lived through.

Leong's comments and the six measures used in the *Globe's* survey resonated with my own experiences. In my consultations I have found that employees will be motivated to perform with quality and energy in those environments in which they feel appreciated, they feel their voice and opinion is heard and respected, they know that they can advance as their skills are honed, and they know that their bosses are accessible and supportive.

In considering these characteristics that are the foundation of a positive work environment one may wonder, "Aren't these factors obvious? Don't most employers recognize the importance of applying these different dimensions in the workplace?" Although they may seem obvious, as I discussed in my January, 2009 article many people are employed in settings in which managers do not help staff to feel appreciated, do not invite feedback, express more negative than positive comments to employees, and have not established avenues for advancement.

I believe that understanding those settings in which staff thrive, in which peak performances are the norm rather than the exception regardless of one's position in the organization, can provide guideposts for the actions we create in our own workplace. If you are in a managerial position you might ask, "Do I and my company follow similar practices to those of top-rated places in which to work?"

Before describing the top-rated large, midsized, and small companies, please note that I am not endorsing products offered by these companies but rather highlighting what they do to nurture a positive work environment.

Top Large Employer

The *Globe* rated Comcast as the top Large Employer. While Comcast provides excellent benefits for the 4,000 individuals it employs in Massachusetts, the *Globe* asks, “But what really makes Comcast a great place to work? Bosses listen. While Comcast scored high in all categories of the Top Places Survey, the cable company scored highest in one: managers. Employees time and again praised the openness of the workplace, the approachability of managers and top executives, and their willingness to take seriously employee comments, suggestions, and ideas.”

Peter McLinn, an engineer monitoring field performance, was cited as an example of an employee who came up with an idea that was embraced by his superiors. He developed “software to integrate the company’s organizational chart with a map so engineers could quickly know whom to contact when trouble arose.” McLinn says, “It’s clear that everyone on the management team wanted to move this forward because it delivered such positive results.”

Stephen L. Hackley, Comcast senior vice president for the Greater Boston region, expresses thoughts about the success of his company that are captured by the *Globe*. “Employees are given wide discretion to solve problems and given the authority to keep customers satisfied. Say, for example, a subscriber has repeated difficulties with service. Under a new guarantee program, a customer service representative or field technician can discount the bills or even give the customer three free months of a premium channel without prior approval. No questions asked.”

This kind of autonomy and responsibility has not only contributed to a rise in employee satisfaction but to customer satisfaction as well. Hackley adds, “It’s a matter of trusting that our employees will make good decisions in the moment. We want them to be discerning customer advocates, and you can’t put that in a metric: This happens, do this.”

What a refreshing attitude!

James Mendes, a field technician at Comcast, contrasts the freedom he enjoys in his current position with his previous position as a supermarket assistant grocery manager where he felt his every move was watched and every decision questioned. Mendes says, “I have more freedom and more responsibility, and as long as I don’t make any mistakes, no one is on my back. I’m allowed to fix all the problems and make the customer happy. I’ve never been happier.”

The *Globe* concludes, “Such feelings were common among Comcast employees in the Top Places survey. They said they felt appreciated. They received training and tools to do their jobs better. They had opportunities to advance.”

Hackley summarizes the Comcast philosophy. “We want our people to go home and say, ‘I had a good day.’”

Top Midsize Employer

The highest rated Midsize Employer was Harmonix Music Systems, the maker of popular music video games including Rock Band’s Guitar Hero and The Beatles: Rock Band. Similar to Comcast, the philosophy at Harmonix is to empower employees and to demonstrate trust. The *Globe* reports, “That includes a fervent commitment to openness. Workers at Harmonix know what their leaders are up to. For instance, the company’s plan to build a game around the music of the Beatles was known by the whole staff about a year before it was announced to the world, but not a word leaked out.”

Eran Egozy, Chief Technical Officer at Harmonix adds, “We really trust everyone to be good. They really respect the trust we put in them.”

What also impressed me as I read about Harmonix was a commitment to having fun, which I believe to be an important dimension of job satisfaction, one that should never be underestimated. In my experience being devoted to and serious about doing an effective job and having fun at work are not mutually exclusive. Engaging in fun activities reinforces rather than detracts from high employee performance. As an illustration of adding a dimension of playfulness to the Harmonix climate, Egozy and Chief Executive Officer Alex Rigopulos created a singing contest in which they challenged the company’s 320 employees to create singing groups and perform any of the 800 songs included in the Rock Band games. The groups were permitted to sing in any style, “from Gregorian chant to barbershop” and performed during the company’s free

lunch held at a nearby church. The group that was voted number one was feted at a party in its honor on a boat in Boston Harbor.

Top Small Employer

The winner in the Small Employer category was Winter, Wyman Cos., a staffing firm that assists companies to fill openings with appropriately matched professionals. Winter, Wyman (the name was created from the two streets that intersected in front of its first headquarters in Waltham, MA) achieved top Small Company honors in the *Globe* survey as a result of the high grades obtained from employees for its commitment to “training, opportunity for career advancement, the company’s dedication to public service, consistent ethics, rewards for strong performance, and sensitivity to work-life balance.”

I thoroughly endorse inclusion of all of these practices in the workplace. I especially want to highlight two of them. The first is a focus on public service. As I have emphasized in many of my writings, a key factor in leading a resilient lifestyle is to contribute to the well-being of others. I believe that a group is strengthened when it engages in activities that benefit others—activities that fortify a sense of purpose. At Winter, Wyman more than 70 percent of employees participate in the company’s outreach to the community. The specific kinds of charitable activities are chosen by a 15-person committee that encourages employees to offer their input and feedback. The company has established a “community service day” and an annual charitable donation instead of holding a holiday party. Each month the company provides funding and staffing for a birthday party at a local homeless shelter with the nonprofit group Birthday Wishes. A staff member notes, “The outreach keeps us grounded.”

The second variable I wish to highlight is work-life balance. Having created a CD for the corporate world about achieving balance in one’s personal and professional lives and having co-authored with my close friend Sam Goldstein *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, I am acutely aware of the importance of leading a balanced lifestyle. Tracy Cutone, the General Manager of Human Resources at Winter, Wyman captures the firm’s appreciation of balance when she emphasizes, “I started out as an individual contributor and worked up to the head of two divisions. During that time, I had four children and

found Winter, Wyman such a family-friendly employer, offering flexible scheduling. I have a lot of autonomy and the ability to structure my business around the needs of my family. This company is all about people, and I've had great opportunities to add to my repertoire and enhance my knowledge base."

Bob Boudreau, the chief executive of Winter, Wyman, in reflecting about the company's approach to its employees, succinctly observes, "It seems so simple, but it works for us: The more you give, the more you get."

So simple, but so true—a philosophy that I believe can be applied with noticeable benefit in any work setting.

Concluding Reflections

Many men and women dislike, even dread, going to work. They feel drained and defeated by the end of the day and they often bring their frustration and anger home. Just as I have written extensively about the importance of creating positive school climates for both staff and students, I believe that managers and executives at all companies must strive to promote the kind of positive atmosphere that exists in the three companies described in this article.

In one of my recent workshops, a member of the audience commented that in the current economy it is not easy to be up-beat or maintain a positive workplace atmosphere, especially with limited budgets. However, as Comcast, Harmonix, Winter, Wyman, and many other firms have demonstrated, the factors that contribute to job satisfaction are possible even during challenging economic times. Let's remember Business Editor Leong's observation, "The best employers know that loyalty is forged during difficult times. How you treat employees now is critical to surviving—and ultimately conquering, we hope—the toughest economy many of us have ever lived through."

In addition, I believe that even in these times of limited budgets applying the practices of effective companies is not as costly as one might assume. What is costly is when you have a group of employees (and managers) who are disgruntled and disillusioned. Employees who feel frustrated and angry are increasingly vulnerable to treating both clients/customers and colleagues with a lack of caring and respect. In such a scenario the cost to the business will be far greater than taking steps that lead

employees to say, “I love my job. I love where I work.” It would be wonderful if everyone could experience that kind of genuine loyalty to one’s workplace.

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