

A GREAT PLACE TO WORK: The New Culture Dream

By Tara Mibus, Partner, AMCA
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When the Great Place to Work® conference kicked off their first full day at the Hyatt Regency in Dallas, the pop music was pumping, spotlights were tracking across the audience, and thousands of eyes swept the stage in expectation. There were delegates from every industry, from companies large and small, from all over the world. And yet despite the diversity, I had a sense of unity. As the day progressed and themes emerged, I realized that we truly were united in more than just our presence. Our organizations today are facing many of the same challenges. In keynote speeches and breakout sessions, presenters and participants asked the same questions again and again: How do we recruit top talent? How do we retain that talent? How do we foster and grow our employees' best performance? But even more importantly, as attendees we were united in pursuit of a particular

solution to these problems: a thriving, healthy workplace culture.



More Than a Paycheck

Creating a new culture that attracts and supports the best employees is not easy. It's hard enough to achieve a measure of self-change; changing the cultural momentum of an entire organization can at times seem impossible. But the conference speakers made clear what many of us already suspected: culture change is a mandatory endeavor for those who want to be a Great Place to Work®. The old culture models of command-and-control and of profit first and only are not good enough anymore. Today's employees expect more than just a paycheck and company profits as a purpose. We learned that if we want to find the best people, keep them, and unleash their best performance, then our workplace has to be different at the core. A great place to work must *intentionally* cultivate cultures which focus on employees first and do so in a holistic fashion.

The Starting Place

The Container Store is a fantastic example of a company that has put their employees first since the beginning. I, along with a couple hundred attendees, had the privilege of a site tour prior to the conference. After the tour, co-founder Kip Tindell gave a short presentation and took questions. The last question he took may have been the most important: Where do you start? How do you actually implement a culture change? Kip answered, with conviction that seemed born of experience that change “has to start from the top. The leader must decide that they want to turn

things around.” In a later presentation, Kevin Cleary, CEO of Clif Bar, echoed, “You gotta live it.” Leaders have to walk the talk. We have to demonstrate ourselves that we genuinely prize people. And that means whole people, their lives inside *and* outside of work. When we show a change to those immediately around us—a new respect, appreciation, and investment in others—it paves the way for a natural expansion of culture change into the rest of the organization.



The conference addressed many aspects of building a great culture—from weaving fun into the fabric of your company to the productivity benefits of architecture to the importance of trust in teaming—but there were three that stood out to me as broad and endemic needs in many of our workplaces today: purpose, life-work balance, and passion.

Bringing Purpose to Life

Several of the keynote speakers emphasized the need for purpose. Dick Costolo, CEO of Twitter, opened the conference with an interview. He urged, “Don’t just tell people, ‘This is what you have to achieve.’ Remind people *why* you have to achieve something.” He encouraged using stories and examples to bring a larger purpose to life. Kevin

Cleary reiterated the point: “Purpose is not incremental to your company’s core business. It *is* your company’s core business. Once a company’s purpose becomes profits, it has lost its way. And it has lost the hearts of the people working there. Purpose is the overlap between what the company aspires to create for the world and what employees aspire to create in their lives.” Purpose can turn something that’s just a “job” into a mission. Purposeful work is powerful enough to overcome many other deficiencies in a culture. A strong sense of purpose is one answer to the desire for high performance from our employees. Kevin Cleary said, “When a company has purpose and company leaders demonstrate those values, it creates a safe environment for people to reveal themselves and connect to the company’s purpose. And, they will start bringing more and more of themselves to work. They feel safe enough to share their ideas.”

Incredible Benefits Do Not Mean Expensive Benefits

The problem of life-work balance was another touchstone issue throughout the conference. Kevin Cleary said it perhaps most honestly: “Most employees do not care about the quantity of a company’s profits. What they care about is the quality of their lives.” He championed a different mindset, one that looks for opportunities to enrich employees’ lives: “Too often when it comes to benefits, we ask the wrong question. We ask, ‘How much will they cost?’ The question should be, ‘How and where can we invest?’ Incredible benefits do not mean extravagant benefits. There is an endless amount of inexpensive benefits that you can offer that people LOVE and that are easy to implement. Where can we invest to make people’s lives easier, more convenient, healthier, happier, more fulfilling, and less stressful?” While perks should not be

equated with a great culture, benefits that do invest in employees’ life-work balance are certainly part of the foundation that supports such a culture.

Passion Like Clif Bar

Kevin Cleary’s keynote was particularly impactful to me, in great part due to how visibly passionate he was when he spoke. He made the case with some credibility, then, that passion is also a critical component of a great culture and a great workplace.



Surprisingly, he did not differentiate between bringing your outside passions to work and being passionate about the work itself. He explained, “The things that I am passionate about outside of work are the same things that I am passionate about when I am at work. Believe me, I get push back. People say [...] ‘Clif Bar is much bigger than our company; we are too small. We can’t afford to let folks go for a run during the work day.’ I’ll tell you right now—you can’t afford not to! I would LOVE it if every single person at Clif Bar went for a run every single day—if that’s what they love to do. I want the people who work at Clif Bar to be FIRED UP! I want them to be happy, inspired, confident, creative, HEALTHY. And that is how you feel when you do the things that you love. I would take seven hours of pure productivity over eight and a half hours of drudgery any day.” Kevin made me ponder whether passion is more comparable to fuel than a destination. Instead of searching for the work activities that might *produce* a passionate response, can I use the things I am already passionate about outside of work, integrate them into my day to “rev” up my engine, and then use that energy for more creative and productive work output? At so many workplaces, engaging with our passions is the last thing on our list. But after listening to Kevin I can see why our holistic state-of-being is so important to our workplace performance. A person who lacks the time, space, or support for their passions will be producing from a lower level of energy and vision. Therefore it is well worth the investment in our employees to help them live into their passions.

The Great Place to Work® conference offered us many useful strategies and inspiring stories. And at a practical level, I now understand better why needs such as purpose, life-work balance, and passion are essential to creating healthy workplace cultures. However, my biggest takeaway was not cerebral. It was not necessarily emotional either. It felt more like opening a door. It was electric, and it hit me during the very first keynote with Dick Costolo. It was the sound of a megastar corporate leader espousing the tenets of Servant Leadership without apology. Then it was one presenter after another dreaming of a vibrant workplace culture as if it was a common dream, even the *best* dream. It was each question from the audience betraying their determined struggle for greatness in a greater form. It was the sound of so many leaders today believing genuinely and deeply in the importance of caring for each other. In a culture where cynicism is so often the order of the day, it was a sense of hope. Hope that our future is not determined by previous norms. Change is possible. And it starts with me.

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