



CULTURE CLUB

Building and Growing Outstanding Workplaces

By Rebecca Patrick

Festering worms.

That symbolic phrase turned out to be quite pertinent in framing what separates a great employer from those that are merely okay or possibly struggling internally.

BizVoice® talked to representatives from four companies that have made the Best Places to Work in Indiana list multiple times:

- **Chris Campbell**, president of First Bancshares (parent company of Centier Bank) at ccampbel@centier.com, and **Chrisanne Christ**, senior partner at Centier Bank, at cchrist@centier.com
- **Mark Chamberlain**, CEO of Lakeside Wealth Management Group, at mark@lakesidewealth.com
- **Tom O’Neil**, president of OfficeWorks, at toneil@officeworks.net
- **Casey Stanley**, vice president of product management and marketing for Ontario Systems, at casey.stanley@ontariosystems.com

As for those worms, Christ gets the credit for the visual: “If there’s a can of worms festering, let’s pop the lid and let’s deal with it!”

That mentality of not being afraid in the

quest for continual improvement is a characteristic the companies share and demonstrate throughout the discussion.

‘You matter’

An organization won’t get very far in the Best Places evaluation – or be viewed as a desired employer in general – if its workers don’t feel valued. And there isn’t a secret weapon to making it happen; a varied approach is what’s in order.

Empowerment is one avenue for Lakeside, based in Chesterton.

“Every decision that gets made here doesn’t have to come from me, and I want them to take the bull by the horns and make decisions, and take projects and run with them. It’s rotating leadership,” Chamberlain explains. “They don’t need to run everything by me. That’s not what we’re about. If that happens, the dynamic then is this company is only as smart as I am, and that’s an extremely limiting thought process.”

Offers Stanley, “I was speaking to our people service leader about culture and her take was the big stuff is easy; the one-time stuff will often get attention and be taken care of, but it’s a sustained effort around the little things that make a difference for us.

“Attention to detail and ongoing little things help build those sort of lasting emotional bonds and relationships that matter at the end of the day,” he surmises.

“That translates to volunteer time off; an on-the-spot bonus program where someone



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can go grab a \$25 or a \$50 gift card for their colleague who’s done something extraordinary or helpful. It’s having a program (to enable) surrounding one of your co-workers or colleagues to help with meals in a time when maybe their family is struggling or they have some problem.”

That last aspect of creating a family-like atmosphere is something Chamberlain wholeheartedly endorses. At the Lakeside office, there is a huge kitchen right inside the front door that is routinely put to good use.

“We like to cook for each other. That’s what family does. Going out there and cooking an omelet in the morning, or making a salad or something together at lunch, and then being able to spend the time not talking about business – but just talking about kids, problems and this and that. That creates the friendships that make it a fun and safe place to come to work.”

Communication is another area the group brands as vital.

O’Neil cites one of business author Patrick Lencioni’s books that advises, “Communicate, overcommunicate and then reinforce the communication.

“The days of being able to come in and put it up on a board in the conference room and call it a day and figure you’ve got a good culture ... that doesn’t work; I’m not sure it ever worked. But just the implementation, the communication, we learned the hard way that it’s very, very important. You just can’t take it for granted.”

In fact, OfficeWorks and Ontario Systems have adopted the Emplify app to communicate instantly with employees. Taking polls and storing key HR documents like group health insurance information are among the additional tasks that can be performed.

Last fall, Centier Bank – which has 55 locations in the state – added a new component to its annual review process. The “stay interview” takes the temperature of current staff to see how they feel about the company and their place in it.

“We want to learn more – how we can retain them and better yet, how we can make them more fulfilled by coming and working here and spending so many hours with us,” Christ begins.

“We’ve gotten some amazing information. Some of our managers were a little skeptical at first ... but our associates felt so valued and cared for that their managers were spending some time talking with them, getting to know them, even though they might have been working many, many years together.”

Christ has turned the exercise into a mini excursion for her direct reports by taking them out of the office for 30 minutes or an hour to talk while enjoying food or coffee.

Don’t make these mistakes

Chamberlain builds on attracting and retaining employees. He notes that millennials in particular “want to be involved in something that they feel they can leave their handprints on.

“You can’t compensate your way out of that. You can’t just keep paying people more and more to keep them engaged. They have to know that whatever product it is that comes out the door, that they were able to influence it. It gives them meaning in what they do. And I actually think that is multi-generational.”

Stanley adds, “When you get to that (belief of) meaningful work, then you have the opportunity to build something special.”

Call it communicating the why and connecting the dots to each employee’s importance to the main objective.

“Inspiring that across the board really gets people going and into (work). But that’s the hardest part too,” Campbell asserts.

Another challenge is not getting swept up in the day-to-day fires and losing track of maintaining your core culture and values.

“We’ve found in a relatively small organization, it really requires leadership

from the top and there needs to be a point person that is driving it,” O’Neil states. “Actually, the first time we did the Best Places to Work survey was about four years ago. We made the list. Then we did not make it the next year.

“It’s not an automatic. You’ve got to work at it – and the payback is significant. But that was a heck of a lesson for us to learn; you can’t rest on your laurels and continue to have a great place to work.”

Maintains Stanley: “It is everyone’s job to protect culture, to grow it, to invest in it, to make it better. And I think once people are connected to it, emotionally connected to it, they have internalized it, and then you can let them loose. That is where it can really thrive.”

Wellness now a priority

Over the course of the Best Places program, probably no practice has advanced more than workplace wellness and what organizations are doing in that area.

“If you had said to me even five years ago that we would be, at least regionally (in east central Indiana), a leader in workplace wellness and we would have the kind of engagement that we have from our staff, I don’t know that I would have believed it,” Stanley declares.



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Employees at Ontario Systems in Muncie are incentivized to take part in a variety of health-related initiatives that include working out (they partner with a local CrossFit gym) and having wellness visits with their doctors. Contributions are then made to health savings accounts based on activity and achievement.

"I believe it's of enough value that it's an advantage to us when we're recruiting, attracting talent and retaining it. I also believe that it has absolutely lowered our health care costs; we're self-insured. And the level of participation we've seen has been very, very high. It's been one of the best things we've done," Stanley concludes.

Lakeside has a similar program but, as of a year ago, also made choice architecture a bigger part of the equation.

"We're not taking away people's choices to do what they want to do, but if you make it easier for them and steer them in the direction of healthier choices, then they're more likely to make those better choices," Chamberlain contends.

Baskets full of bananas, apples and other healthy snacks are accessible around the office, and the staff refrigerator is stocked with spinach and salad ingredients.

OfficeWorks is also onboard with that concept – with fresh fruit along with dispensers of cereal, trail mix and granola in its kitchen.

What's more, the Fishers company has taken the focus beyond physical well-being to implementing a "working well tracker," O'Neil notes.

"(Sure) we've got things that we list in nutrition and physical activity in your overall

purpose, but also things that individuals might like to do that really have a bigger overall meaning for them such as community involvement and finances (for which there are related seminars offered). We created a form so that employees can track their progress."

Meanwhile, Centier Bank has on-site health clinics at the Merrillville corporate headquarters, in Valparaiso and in the Indianapolis market.

"What we like is this is a very proactive, engaging health relationship; it's not just treating acute needs," Christ reports.

A story she relayed about a chance conversation underscores the importance of that dynamic. A middle-aged woman she had missed seeing in the company's walking program shared with her that she was off work due to a hysterectomy.

I said, "Oh, I'm sorry!" She said, "Don't be. The clinic saved my life!" The doctor asked her when was the last time she had an annual gynecological checkup, which prompted her to go in for one.

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Get involved

Whether an organization makes the Best Places to Work list or not isn't the real takeaway from the program, insists the panel, which urges more first-time and repeat participation.

"You change the dynamic of your firm," Chamberlain begins. "There's sort of this collective working together attitude that changes once you get in the competition for this or do well at it. It spreads the responsibility for being a good place to work amongst everybody rather than it just has to be a leadership initiative."

O'Neil concurs: "I love the idea of being able to try to get all of the associates to own it, not just the leadership team." Incidentally, OfficeWorks is back on the list after trying another program in the interim – "we didn't like it so much."

All understand it may be painful for management to hear employee criticisms from the surveys, but it's worse being in the dark.

"Because, then you won't hear about the

problem until it's too late," Stanley cautions. "Even if the feedback is difficult at times, it's constructive and gives you the information you need to go to work."

"My recommendation is invest the time and energy to measure it – to get the data so you do know where the risks are, where you need to put your resources and time to grow it and make it better. I think this is a great tool to do that."

Campbell is more blunt. "For us, it pointed out our blind spots where we weren't doing well. It helped us see what we didn't see and make improvements."

Centier Bank has been on the Best Places list 11 of the 12 years of the program and every time it has applied – highlighted by being named the top employer for large companies in 2010.

According to Christ, they keep coming back because the learning process never ends.

"We still get nuggets (from the surveys) that make us say, 'You know what? We're not at the level that we're striving for yet. We need to really work on these.' Or, 'Hey, we finally got to the percentage that we were looking for; our efforts have paid off!' ... We've definitely made substantial positive changes to our organization with the feedback."



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