

Employees of Habanero Consulting Group enjoy a high level of camaraderie, one of the core reasons why the company has been awarded #1 Best Workplace in Canada in the medium-sized company category by the Great Place to Work Institute

Connecting People to Purpose

CAMARADERIE AND ITS ROLE IN THE WORKPLACE

By Heather Hudson

When a Habanero Consulting Group employee returned to her Calgary home days after floodwaters ravaged the city in June 2013, she found many of her belongings underwater. Wading through the main floor, she surveyed the damage and wondered how to even begin to salvage what was left.

Originally from the UK, she didn't have family nearby to help source what was needed to dry out her home and sort through waterlogged possessions.

Fortunately, another kind of family swept in to help. For over a week, her colleagues from Habanero showed up with supplies, food, expertise and a donated generator that powered fans and a sump pump.

"The Habanero family showed up and spent a week digging sludge out of a basement, doing construction work, brewing tea – whatever it took to get their colleague back on her feet," said Habanero president, Steven Fitzgerald.

According to Jen Wetherow, senior national director of Great Place to Work Institute Canada, the connection Habanero colleagues share is one of the reasons why the company has been named the #1 Best Workplace in Canada in the medium-sized company category by the Great Place to Work Institute.

"When we look at winning organizations, we see great diversity in terms of sector, industry, size and location... But in each of them, employees trust the people they work for, take pride in what they do and enjoy the people they work with," said Wetherow. "It's about these three basic relationships and the last one embodies camaraderie."

Fitzgerald says camaraderie is built into the DNA of his company.

"I believe there is huge strategic potential in the idea of camaraderie," he said. "It's a bit of a sleeping giant in our organizations – a living, breathing element that can have a huge impact if nourished and brought to life in the right ways."

With three offices in three time zones – Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto – Habanero's leaders need to be strategic about camaraderie. Putting together teams that work well together, using technology like an internal enterprise social network to connect employees and hosting a lunch for employees every Friday are just some of the ways they nurture the connection employees feel to each other and to the company.

"When you structure your organization well, it helps build relationships and helps it function as one," said Fitzgerald. "[Because we're connected], we get to use the collective brain of our entire

workplace culture

organization. People are comfortable with each other, so they get up to speed faster and are more powerful as teams.”

BENEFITS TO THE BOTTOM LINE

According to Wetherow, there’s a strong correlation between high-performing organizations and high-trust organizations.

“Building on this trust is one of the best investments a company can make,” she said. “It leads to lower turnover, greater innovation (when people feel safe to take risks) and higher productivity (when competition amongst employees is replaced with collaboration). There is a bottom line advantage for companies that can successfully nurture these relationships.”

In fact, Great Place to Work Canada research indicates that publicly traded 100 Best Companies consistently outperform major stock indices by a factor of two and they enjoy 65 per cent less turnover, among other benefits.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO TO FOSTER CAMARADERIE?

Wetherow says camaraderie is about creating a space that nurtures the development of high-trust relationships. She offers a series of specific steps HR leaders can take to help accomplish that.

HIRE FOR CULTURAL FIT

In the Best Companies, leaders hire for cultural fit first.

“This doesn’t mean you’re looking for a homogenous group of people. Diversity is essential for innovation and should be pursued in hiring, but not when it comes to shared values,” said Wetherow.

Habanero invests up to 20 hours per hire in a recruitment process that includes a series of fit interviews followed by an opportunity for candidates to interact with the team they may join.

WELCOME NEW HIRES WARMLY

If you want to foster an emotional connection to the company’s deeper purpose, a great opportunity is at the outset.

“The onboarding process offers a unique and fleeting moment for management to tell their story and inspire feelings of pride and camaraderie. Use this time to help newcomers understand the higher purpose of their daily contributions. Coordinate and support activities that will allow these employees to connect socially and know they are truly welcome,” said Wetherow.

CELEBRATE IMPORTANT EVENTS

A birthday cake in the conference room is a nice gesture, but honouring important milestones in an employee or team’s evolution is an ingrained part of a well-connected company’s culture. Investing time, space and resources to celebrate occasions such as the completion of a project, an employee’s recent marathon or other moments of personal and corporate significance nurture those emotional connections and help employees feel valued.

LISTEN TO EMPLOYEES

When employees feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work, including their passions and occasionally their problems, a feeling of wellbeing and a support network is part of

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their day. While some leaders may be concerned about distractions and disruptions, evidence shows that employees who feel well supported and understood are better able to be productive, attentive and motivated to focus on their work – and not let their colleagues down.

THANK YOUR EMPLOYEES

Gratitude goes a long way, says Wetherow. When you show respect and appreciation for team members, they will notice and follow suit.

“Use the word ‘we’ to describe accomplishments. Say thanks and be generous, frequent and warm with your praise of the team,” she said.

Not only will employees feel appreciated and important, they will understand that gratitude is part of the company culture and feel compelled to practise it accordingly.

ENCOURAGE AND REWARD COOPERATION

In today’s workplace, collaboration is a huge advantage. Not only does it harness the brainpower of a group, it also removes competition, which often leads to unhealthy motivations and attitudes toward work.

“Together, [a team] can deliver far more than the sum of their individual efforts,” said Wetherow. “If employees feel like they can work together to create something larger, you’ll have higher productivity, risk taking and innovation. If I feel safe in my work group, I’m more likely to step outside my comfort zone and do more to achieve more.”

In “The Great Workplace: How to Build It, How to Keep it, and Why It Matters,” Great Place to Work consultants Dr. Michael Burchell and Dr. Jennifer Robin enumerate the benefits of camaraderie.

“When employees feel a sense of camaraderie with their co-workers, they feel as energized by their work environment as they do by their non-work environment. They bring all of their skills to the table, and they readily help each other accomplish organizational goals...”

“Any ancillary worries about family issues impacting the work environment or difficult decisions and conversations are lessened because people are in a supportive environment, and this allows even greater productivity. When productivity ends with a celebration, it builds even stronger ties, and the cycle begins again.” ■