

Unlocking the “Employer of Choice” Dilemma

6 Keys to Success

By Deanne DeMarco

Companies around the globe are starting to experience labor shortages and are having a difficult time retaining quality workers. The competition for key talent is quickly becoming a battleground.

One answer lies in your organization’s ability to have a culture where people actually *want to work*—in other words, you need to become an employer of choice. Numerous reputable studies have discovered that corporations that are viewed as a great place to work outshine their competitors in retaining talent, market share, behavioral success, and bottom line financial performance.

Employers of choice have corporate cultures where the working climate is supportive and genuinely appealing—often referred to as a “warm climate.” Many corporate objectives state the “desire” to be an “employer of choice” and delegate the sole task to the human resources department. Unfortunately, corporate officials overlook the basic issues needed in creating a supportive corporate culture. The result is a company with improved benefits, which on the surface makes sense; however, good benefits alone do not create an employer of choice or a positive work environment.

Regrettably, many companies have cold climates versus warm ones. And while the Baby Boomers have tolerated cold climate organizations as “just the way it is,” Generation X workers are putting their foot down: either the company’s climate changes or the Gen-Xers change companies.

When given the choice, Gen-Xers want to be a part of companies with a warm, pleasant, and supportive climate and reject a cold, stressful, unpleasant one. They want to work for companies that display loyalty, pride, trust, respect, strong relationships, and open communication. When at work, they want to feel supported, included, challenged, rewarded, and encouraged to think up new and diverse ideas. They abhor such things as defensiveness, blame-game tactics, alienation, and managers being closed to ideas. Therefore, if you want to keep Gen-X workers on your team, you need to create an inviting climate in your organization.

What exactly influences the company’s working cultural climate? Two things: 1) The attitude from the top filters down into the whole organization, which includes the parent organization’s political situation and organizational systems, and 2) Effective communication and leadership skills of managers and team leaders. That is why you may have a company with a cold climate and a corresponding culture, but you see pockets within that company where people think it’s a great place to work. Everyone wants to work in a certain person’s department because that manager created a warm climate.

But having “pockets” of warmth within your company isn’t enough. Corporate officials must ensure a warm climate permeates every department and touches every employee in order to retain quality talent, improve productivity, and reap bottom line success. Following are some suggestions to help you accomplish precisely that.

Key # 1: Be Descriptive

When you communicate with others, describe situations without judging the right or wrongness of something. For example, when someone comes up with an idea that you

don't like or think won't work, the cold and natural response is, "No. That'll never work." But such a response breeds defensiveness and resentment. To communicate warmly, a better response would be something like, "Let's talk more about that idea. What do you think the impact of your suggestion would be on our sales department?" Managers need to involve employees in decisions and demonstrate a safe environment, even with opinions contrary to their own. When you're descriptive and specific, you're encouraging a conversation about the idea and not shooting someone down. And if the idea really won't work, your conversation will bring that to light in a natural and non-confrontational way.

Key # 2: Engage Your People

Many companies say they solve problems as a team, but in reality the manager proposes a solution, and that's it. No one challenges the manager, either because they know from past experience not to, or because the manager doesn't ask for feedback in an open way. Rather, he or she states the solution and then asks, "Does anyone have a problem with that?" Of course, no one raises a hand. Employees are not actively encouraged to submit ideas, counter suggestions, or speak honestly. Gen-Xers want to give their input and opinions. And when you hear them out, you'll likely have a better solution and will foster a warmer climate in your group.

Key # 3: Collaborative Style

When managers communicate with a pre-conceived end result or action, they make people withdraw and create distrust. For example, a manager may gather the team together to brainstorm a new marketing approach. The manager enters the meeting with an idea for the new marketing message. Even though the team collaborates and comes up with a great idea, when the final marketing piece is revealed, the manager's marketing message is the one featured. In this case employees will feel manipulated. When managers act spontaneously and collaboratively without hidden agendas and motivations, employees develop feelings of ownership, pride, and enthusiasm for corporate goals. So always put any pre-conceived ideas aside and let the group synergy work.

Key # 4: Take Heart

Employees want managers who have empathy for their situation. Realize that many Gen-Xers are marrying and having kids a decade later than the Boomers typically did. So Gen-Xers are in the workforce in high-profile jobs, and they have the added responsibility of a baby at home or aging parents who need their help. Additionally, since most Gen-X families are two-income households, when a family emergency comes up, there's no one at home to take care of it. The employee needs the time off. When managers convey a lack of concern or respond to time off requests in an angry manner, they create resentment in their employees. Remember, Gen-Xers value productivity more so than hours spent on a job. Get assurance that their deadlines will be met (*they will* meet them), and then let them attend to whatever they have to do.

Key # 5: Fairness Rules

Fairness is a fundamental building block in creating a supportive culture; it creates diverse thinking and ideas, and sends the message that each employee is as

important and valuable as the next. Gen-Xers want to feel that they are valued and respected in the company. In order to make that happen, managers need to drop any “status and favoritism” practices they may have. If your company is to keep up with the times and stay competitive, managers need the workers’ perspective on the marketplace and their opinions on corporate products and services. So value the ideas and opinions of employees. Seek differences in opinion, engage in open dialogue, and recognize and support everyone’s point of view.

Key # 6: Be a Facilitator

Facilitation is more than just running a meeting. It’s about asking the right questions. One of the most powerful questions in the facilitative approach is the “what” question, as it helps the conversation focus on discovery. “What” questions help with identifying issues and probing for details. They also get the other person involved with the discussion. Unfortunately, many leaders use questions that begin with the word “why,” which often prompts defensive behavior from others. “Why” questions are often interpreted as criticism, whether intended or not. To avoid this, change your “why” questions to “what” questions. For example, instead of asking, “Why did you do that?” ask, “What are the reasons behind your actions?” or “What caused you to act that way?” Using a facilitative approach can help a team solve problems, make effective decisions, plan projects better, unleash creativity, improve quality, and improve work processes.

Reaping the Rewards

As you make these changes to improve your corporate climate, you’ll quickly notice a marked improvement in your workforce. Employees will be happier at work, more productive, and eager to advance the organization’s mission and goals. And remember, working in a warm climate isn’t just for Gen-Xers. All your employees will feel a greater sense of job satisfaction, regardless of their age or generation identification. In short, a warm climate may be just what your company needs to improve profits and long-term growth.

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