
BEING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

The Ultimate Union-Free Strategy (Part 1 of 2)

By Lloyd M. Field, PhD, SPHR (USA), FIPD (UK)

Why is remaining union-free important for any organization? Certainly there are economic reasons, and concerns about management's ability to exercise its "rights" to manage. In my opinion, however, all of these reasons pale when viewed from the employee's perspective.

To remain union-free means that the employee stakeholder group has voted, or expressed their support, *for* management and not *against* management. This positive affirmation for management's behaviour and the manner in which it has understood and addressed dissatisfaction in the workplace is the foundation for becoming an "employer of choice".

Olympic Gold

No business landscape is complete if it does not include *all* stakeholders: management, customers, and employees. The employee group is not an appendage that can be forgotten when all goes well or dealt with severely when a crisis occurs. *Employees are as important as customers.* Successful organizations invest in the development of a long term, symbiotic relationship between management and employees.

To be acknowledged by your employees as an "employer of choice" is the highest accolade an employer can receive—it's the Olympic gold. Everything stems from our employees: products and services, research, preventative maintenance, customer service, and financial acumen. In many cases, even our management personnel have been promoted from the ranks of the employee group. Our customers are our customers because someone (or some team) was successful at fulfilling their needs and

requirements—and was probably going the extra mile.

The benefits of achieving "employer of choice" status run the full gamut from reduced absenteeism to greater innovation. Such organizations tend to attract and retain the best employees, and these employees bring a strong commitment to their work: they are more likely to be high performing, self motivated, continuous learners who pay great attention to product/service quality and to customer care.

Key Qualities

When becoming "progressively better" is an organizational value, like-minded employers share certain elements or characteristics that are beneficial to both employees and to themselves:

- clarity of mission and purpose
- responsible, people-skilled leadership
- high degree of job satisfaction
- sense of urgency
- collaboration
- self-managing teams
- vitality, energy, creativity
- open, direct communication
- sense of resilience

Start by Checking Your Alignment

How do we become recognized as an "employer of choice"? Certainly not by chance. It requires internal marketing that is consistent with the organization's positive values and with the way we articulate these beliefs. For example, a manager can allocate resources (e.g. money and time) to design an employee communications program. Members of the Human Resource team can be trained to implement this internal marketing campaign; however, each leader must

understand his or her values—and their expression—in order to see the impact that his or her words have on others.

Anything less than a full understanding of the campaign will drain the spirit out of the employee group. *If the manager's thoughts, values and actions are not realigned so that they speak to the integrity, dignity, and capability of all employees, then even the best, most expensive internal marketing campaign will fail.*

We have all seen instances in which it has been easier to "pay your money" than to change how and what you think about employees. Yet how and what we think about our employees is a very good indicator of what we will get back from them. To imagine that this refers to being "warm and fuzzy" is to miss the point. Being "warm and fuzzy" can be seen as a persona that can be turned on (and turned off) when a leader wants something special from his or her employee group. *It is insincere, it is recognized as being insincere, it expresses disrespect for the employees, and it is eventually returned in the form of disrespect from the employees.*

All organizations have values that the leadership group expresses through various actions. For example, the manner in which employees are recruited and trained is an expression of values.

An organization that does not allow sufficient time for this process, and directs its resources to some other activity (maybe putting out another fire!), reveals that recruitment is perceived as an activity of lesser value.

Too often, an organization's stated values are out of alignment with its "real" culture. If an organization has published a values statement (which it may alternatively call a credo or guiding

behaviours), but has no feedback mechanism to determine whether or not front line and middle management groups are “walking the talk”, then there is little assurance that the workplace culture is in harmony with the stated values.

If we do not “inspect what we expect”, we will quickly lose touch with our employees’ perceptions. Inconsistency has a detrimental effect on any organization. So, if you have published your company’s values but are not holding the leadership team accountable for matching its behaviours, actions, policies, and procedures with this statement, an internal communications disaster looms on the horizon.

To understand the seriousness of the problem, consider the effect that such an inconsistency would have if it were applied to your customer/client base. Imagine that your marketing team develops and promotes a particular customer service policy but your sales team makes decisions that bear no relationship to this policy. In the short term, some customers may overlook the inconsistency, but others will complain, and eventually most will seek other vendors whose sales practices are consistent with the marketplace image they are projecting. Inconsistency with your values will have the same impact on your employees.

The key to being an “employer of choice” is to articulate your values and then to have everyone in the leadership group is just as rigorous about ensuring that their actions are consistent with these values as they would if the values were legislated. In the 1950s, for example, few organizations had a policy that addressed non-discrimination in the workplace. Today, it is difficult to find a jurisdiction that has not passed anti-discrimination Human Rights legislation.

So we have policies, practices and training to assist members of the leadership group in ensuring that their behaviours and actions

comply with the legislation. Having legislated certain values (for example, all employees, including candidates, are equal regardless of their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation), we now find that most workplaces comply and do not discriminate on these grounds. *But why do we, as employers, wait for governments to intervene before we take action?*

Let’s be more proactive. Assume, for example, that one of your company’s values is a “passion for the products/services we provide our customers”. This is not a situation that will be legislated by a governing body. The employer must become involved if there are going to be policies, practices, and training sessions that support this value. Policies will have to be written and carried out with a belief in: continuous improvement, doing it right the first time, continual learning, learning from our mistakes; and treating employees as though they are valued internal customers. Leadership personnel will need to be trained in coaching, facilitation and mentoring skills. Employees will also need skills in decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

In short, to be an employer who is known by its employees to have a “passion for the products we make” demands behaviours and actions that support this value. Wishes don’t count. Planning, training, and communicating are the raw ingredients. *The key is to value your employees as much as you value your customers.* And, not surprisingly, this is also one of the cornerstones of Positive Employee Relations.

Internal employee marketing begins with an understanding of employee motivation. Herzberg’s Hygiene-Motivation Theory provides a useful starting point. Because it dates back to the 1970s, a wealth of data validates its accuracy. This theory is based on the concept that employees, at least in our Western society, are generally self-motivated and

willing to accept personal responsibility when their work is characterized by words such as:

- *interesting*, (versus routine or repetitive)
- *challenging* (requiring thought and exploration of ideas, skills or techniques)
- *developing* (allowing for opportunities to increase their competencies and seek positions of greater responsibility)

However, job motivators, which Herzberg refers to as factors that are intrinsic in the nature of work, do not kick in unless they are built on an acceptable platform. This platform is made up of such factors as working conditions and pay and benefit levels. If these factors are not acceptable to the employees, the consequences are usually low morale, an absence of self-motivation and a general malaise or dissatisfaction.

In this state, employees need to be motivated; that is, the supervisor must actually *do* something to cause the employees to want to work. Think of the automobile before the “starter motor”. The driver had to crank the engine until it turned over and only then would it operate on its own power.

If employees are dissatisfied with working conditions, or with their supervisor’s relationship building skills, or with other aspects of their work situation, their dissatisfaction will stand in the way of their willingness to be self-motivated. The dissatisfaction, to use a selling term, is the objection; until it is resolved the sale will not be made.

Companies with a long history as a good employer have a “bank balance” of trust and credibility that they can draw upon in cases of emergency. A company’s “deposited” goodwill can overcome the employees’ objection. But the bank account is not bottomless, and employee patience is not endless.

Before launching any internal marketing program, you must first resolve the extrinsic, or hygiene,

issues. These are factors that are peripheral to the job itself but that nevertheless influence the employee's satisfaction level. Examples include rate of pay, supervisor knowledge, and company policies. If the job motivator's platform is at an unacceptable level, you can't expect employees to be interested in *any* organizational program, whether it is based on continuous improvement, zero defects, or Kiazen.

Laying the Groundwork

The goal of internal marketing is to create a workplace environment in which employees feel positive and are willing to express and share their positive and negative perceptions with management.

Remember that employers are known by how they treat *all* their employees, but particularly those in the most vulnerable positions: those who work in hazardous environments; those who suffer from workplace illnesses or those with disabilities, for example. These cases present the greatest challenges for fair and respectful treatment. And, unfortunate as it may be, employers often have to wage battle against their own company history. Overcoming previously poor employee relations can be an uphill battle.

Becoming known as an "employer of choice" begins at the grass roots, not at the kneecaps. To become known as an "employer of choice", consider the following 10 steps:

1. Articulate your values as they relate to all your stakeholders (shareholders/owners, suppliers, customers, community and employees). If necessary, update the company's vision, mission and values statements.
2. Establish clear and concise guiding behaviours—concrete statements that provide direction about how to implement your values.
3. Train and mentor all members of the leadership group about why and how they can modify

their behaviours and actions to harmonize with the guiding behaviours.

4. Revise all policies, practices, systems, and processes to ensure that *how* the organization actually functions is a reflection of its values and guiding behaviours.
5. Conduct focus group meetings and employee perception surveys to determine employees' current perceptions, compare those to the desired perceptions and/or guiding behaviours, and make changes where necessary.
6. Conduct workshops for *all* employees so they can experience the values and guiding behaviours in action. For example: if respect and dignity are important values, demonstrate *how* this impacts employee-to-employee relationships. Values-based behaviours are not only intended for leaders.
7. Include adherence to the guiding behaviours in the company's performance management program and *reward and recognize* those leaders and employees whose actions have lived up to the values.
8. After six months, and annually thereafter, repeat steps 1 and 5. Complete a gap analysis and make necessary changes.
9. Communicate in various ways with employees about changes that have been made. *Market your success stories!*
10. Remember that training done once is not enough. It is one thing to attend a training program and quite another to put the training into practice by learning how to live by the values. *Knowledge that is not transferred to workplace behaviour is of little value to the organization.*

By following these steps, your workplace culture will change to that described by your values and guiding behaviours. Culture change is a cumulative process;

one success builds upon another. It is not a radical, foot-to-the-floor event. It is not even an event. It is a new and holistic way of being for the organization. This means we have to shed old ways of thinking, behaving, and acting; and, unfortunately, this shifting of paradigms does not happen quickly.

Translating the General to the Specific

Conduct Employee Focus Groups

Conduct a survey or series of focus group meetings to determine what employees *want to know* about the company versus what they currently know.

Do employees want more information about insurance benefits? Do they want to know more information about the various internal job opportunities and career ladders that are available to them? Is the company newsletter useful? If not, how should it be changed? If so, how can the editor make it even better?

Conduct Employee Perception Surveys

Conduct a survey or a series of focus group meetings to determine the employees' level of satisfaction with factors related to their job versus their level of satisfaction with factors related to their work environment.

Using Herzberg's definition, we want to assess the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction for both hygiene and motivational factors. The results will provide an indicator of employee morale.

Survey feedback can be used to alter the internal marketing program in order to better explain issues that are currently causing dissatisfaction, and to enhance those that are currently viewed favourably.

If, for example, the survey asks employees to assess the quality of leadership demonstrated by their immediate supervisor, this information can be used to:

- *implement* new training

programs (including mentoring)

- *revise* policies and procedures
- *provide* feedback to the leadership group

The data will also reveal the employees' perceptions about the leadership group. The odds are weighted heavily in favour of employees viewing their direct supervisors as people who lead by authority, not by inspiration.

This is important information that can be used in internal marketing initiatives, for how can we expect to influence employee perceptions if management thinks its leadership skills and practices are participative, collaborative, and cooperative, and those being led view them as authoritative, manipulative, or inconsistent with organizational values?

Our internal marketing efforts must always be seen as trustworthy, honest, fair, and credible. *When management behaviours and actions do not live up to these high standards, we only have two choices: either upgrade our leadership practices or accept that our internal marketing is flawed and will be seen for what it is—a propaganda tool.*

Communication must be user-friendly

User-friendly does not mean that the pension committee or your actuarial consultants understand the retirement plan and program; it means that the employees and their spouses or partners understand it.

If an employee's first language is not English, have the information translated, as you would do for your external customers. In Canada, we do not market to Quebec customers using literature printed only in English. We do not sell products or services to the American Hispanic community only in English. We do not assume that one language will cover the Common Market in Europe. *Treat your internal customers like your external*

customers and they will never see a trade union as a beneficial option.

Once you start thinking in a user-friendly fashion, opportunities abound. The following ideas will help to you get started:

1. When informing a newly hired employee about the benefit plans and about how to use it, consider inviting his or her spouse or partner to be present. This way, the family unit understands what the options are, can make a more informed choice, and will know how to access the benefit programs if needed.
2. Package all the information in a binder or packet for easy reference and updating. If you provide separate pages and booklets for each policy or program, some will be inevitably be misfiled or lost.
3. Consider training your in-house benefits specialist in customer service skills, which improves the quality of service provided and once again demonstrates that the employees are, in reality, internal customers.

Its an ongoing process, not a product

Internal marketing is a strategic move that will have little effect if based on a "tactics-of-the-month" approach. If continuous improvement is one of the company values, apply it as strenuously to internal marketing as you do to product quality or customer service.

Undertaking an internal marketing initiative such as the preparation, for example, of an employee handbook, is just the beginning. In order to be effective the handbook must be updated regularly, it must be perceived as an important communication tool, and it must be used by supervisors and employees.

Internal marketing is selling the "benefits" of working with your organization. For example, have

you explained to each employee *what their job is worth?* This is the annualized sum of their payroll, overtime, government and insurance premiums paid by the company, bonus or profit sharing, a portion for all recreational/social events, subsidized cafeteria, etc...

Again, if employers don't tell this story, no one will.

You can also publicize employees statistics, such as how many people have been promoted or used the job posting procedure successfully over the last two or three years. How many dollars has the company invested in educational assistance or matching scholarship funds? What successful initiative have the company taken to balance 'work-life' issues? *There is so much to tell!*

Make sure your communication style is well suited to its intended audience—your employee group. Make sure you take into account their language skills and demographics, and consider whether a video or posting your story on your company's web site might be an appropriate option.

Action Plan

1. Follow the ten-step "alignment check" detailed in the section entitled "Laying the Groundwork".
2. Conduct employee focus groups to determine what employees want to know about the company versus what they currently know.
3. Conduct an employee perception survey to assess employee morale.
4. Make this annual "marketing" a component of your business processes.
5. **Remember: If employees are treated as though they are customers, they will never have need of a third party trade union.**

End of Part 1.