

Employees build winning culture at Tasty Catering

Elk Grove-based Tasty Catering was founded in 1984 by brothers Kevin, Larry and Tom Walter. It is a corporate catering and event planning services company that is known for its commitment to excellence and attention to detail. Since its inception, Tasty Catering has built a growing staff of 150. It is a privately held company that earned recognition as the best place to work in the mid-sized category in The Business Ledger's "Best Places to Work in Illinois" competition after taking second in 2007.

Business Ledger news editor Jeremy Stoltz recently spoke with Tom Walter on what the award means for the company, the steps taken to achieve such success and its unique, employee-driven culture. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

Q: What does winning the award for Best Place to Work in Illinois, mid-sized company category, mean to the company?

A: The award has validated the quality of our people. Our staff constructed the culture; they defined our core values, our vision and our purpose. The culture was built by high character people, by asking them how they want the company to be led. The award means they were right about their approach and results. There are a lot of great caterers in our field but none have the depth of staff that is driven for personal excellence and client satisfaction that we have.

Ever since we were named the 2nd best place to work last year, we've accumulated an extraordinary number of resumes from greatly qualified people that want to work with our team. It has been told to me or written to me many times with these resumes that by the applicant reading about the award and then viewing the Web site and seeing the pictures and bios of our staff, they were driven to want to be part of the team; because they saw the smiling faces, they heard their bios, how they started with our company and grew with our company. Many started in high school and worked their way through college with us and then came back to work with us.

For the company, it meant we will continue to attract good people that want to work with us and validated the people that built our culture, that they were right in how they did it. My brothers and I didn't build the culture, we allowed them to define it and build it, to say this is what we want to do.

Q: Have you had employees stay with your company in lieu of better offers from competitors?

A: Absolutely. We bring in motivational speakers from time to time and after they view the company and talk to us, invariably, this happens every time, they'll say, 'If you ever leave here, you're crazy. You're cared for. You're loved. They want you. They like you. You might find more money someplace else but why would you want to leave?'

I had a major caterer, one that does four times what we do, in here yesterday. She came in for lunch to visit. By the time she left three hours later, she said, 'Can you come to my company and visit me? I need your insight on how to do things.'

We have people trying to take our talent surreptitiously and directly and they just don't seem to want to leave.

We had one girl put out a resume to see what her value was in the market. And she came back and said, 'You know what, I can't even think about leaving.'

Most of our kids started with us when they were 15 years old. The core group of our leaders started when they were in high school, worked their way through college, got their degrees and then spent time working within the professional areas of the company. Now they are in their mid-20s to late-20s. This applies to all our staff. So even our 25-year-olds have been with us for 10 years. They know what we're all about.

Q: What was the process for gathering feedback from your employees?

A: That started by our core group of young people that grew up together, grew up in our company together and went to local schools. So they grew up together; they were friends. They went to college and came back and said, 'You need to have a clearly defined culture.'

It was suggested that we read the book Good to Great. So we read it in Spanish and English throughout the whole company, chapter by chapter. And we have a Good to Great counsel in Spanish and English. We go over similar agenda items and they were the ones that defined our culture. It is stated throughout our company in English and Spanish in every major room in the building, it's up on big signs on the walls.

The first one states that we will always be moral, ethical and legal. The second one is that we treat others with respect. And it goes on from there. There are seven major core values.

Then they defined what they wanted the vision to be and my brothers and I sat there and listened to them and said, okay.

One of the answers shocked me at the time; it just blew me right out of the water. Their big audacious goal was to build a great enduring company with one of the most recognized and respected brands in the industry. I said, 'Why don't you put the word catering in there?' They said, 'We're not just going to be a catering company. There's going to be other things and there may be no catering companies some day.' And since that day, two of the people in that room have started other businesses that we've funded and made partners with. They have grown to make in excess of seven figures, and that was two people in their twenties. Their idea was, we're going to have other things but we're always going to follow these core purposes.

Another girl, who was 24, talked about operational excellence and how to build a sustainable business. To do that we have to have the same culture applied to every business we start and maintain that. So they took us to school and they taught us what they were learning in school today and how we can better enhance the company.

Then we went into the Spanish department, the culinary department and the drivers, and they do the same thing. They said this company could be better run if we have uniforms and we achieve certain goals for certain types of recognition. So from every part of the company, in these meetings, they expressed what their needs were.

Q: You encourage your employees to develop their own businesses?

A: In our company we allow and encourage autonomy and entrepreneurial development. If you have an idea and you want to start a company, we're here to start it with you. We encourage that

to individual responsibilities and personal growth. I cannot tell you how many people in this company are coming up with ideas on how it could be an offshoot for a need of our company.

Q: How do you define success?

A: Seventy-five percent of the award is based on how the staff used the company and their leaders. They do a survey that we know nothing about. In our case, it's how the staff viewed what they did. So they are judging themselves. Our success has to do with what they've accomplished, no due to what we, the owners, have accomplished.

Q: How does management and the employees work together to achieve the goals set forth?

A: Because each department has that circle of discipline where they are completely responsible and autonomous, they hold themselves accountable and they are recognized company-wide for what they've achieved. Every day, there are pros and cons on jobs that we've done and there's customer feedback and it's all sent by email. Everybody in the company reads how every job has progressed, how every client has been handled, how issues have been addressed. So there's a peer pressure to excel. A high desire to be the best at what we do is one of our core values. So the owners now just have to facilitate their needs.

Q: Do you offer your employees perks and benefits?

A: We offer perks and benefits, but they are not there to make the company leaders feel good about what they offer their people. We focus instead on the needs of the staff. A health club membership doesn't help a low level culinary worker pay his rent. So we constantly communicate with the staff about their needs. Then we attempt to satisfy them.

We start by establishing a priority of need. First comes religion, and then comes your family, then education and then work. So if you have religious issues, you're off of work without any question or hesitation. If you have a family problem and you leave, your pay will continue throughout that period until the family issue is solved. Education and school issues are respected. Sometimes the kids that are in night school or are going to graduate school say, 'Can I have a couple of hours in the conference room to finish up this project?' Yeah, go ahead.

One girl said, 'My class load is so great, I can't work Wednesdays. She asked if she could work Saturdays or Sundays from home. We said, 'That's fine, just get the work done.'

Q: What are some of the other employee needs management focuses on?

A: The other needs that need to be identified are financial, emotional, self-worth, recognition, communication and understanding of where the company is going and what it is doing. Every week there is a three to four page info sheet about what was accomplished the previous week. Who did something really good. What issues, problems might have existed. How we addressed those. What is coming up in the future. It's almost department by department. So everybody realizes where the company is going.

We reveal the bottom line by doing a P and L meeting with every staff member once a month, where they see the books and they realize where the company's profitability is. If they realize that we're in a recession or hard times, they're not going to be expecting a raise. So they're grateful to get cost of living increases and bonuses.

Other needs are personal growth; making sure that they're growing. That they're not just standing and doing the same job for 35 years, asking, 'Where's the hope and happiness in my life?' We ask them, 'What do you want to do now? What other challenges do you want?'

And love. We make sure that everybody receives the magic four-letter word that corporate America, now being politically correct, hates. But if you feel the love and you feel the need and you feel wanted and appreciated, then you want to go where you feel the love. So many of our people have come in and said, 'Thank goodness it's Monday. I'm here with you guys. I'm here with my friends.'

Q: How are you able to keep a positive working environment day after day?

A: We just don't tolerate any negativity about fellow workers. You can not say anything negative about anybody because that starts clicks. Instead we've said that if you've got a problem, go address the person. Talk to them. But feel the love.

Q: In what way does satisfying employee needs increase productivity?

A: Once the needs are satisfied, their ability to work, their productivity increases drastically. They are free from all the questions of: Where is this company going? Are we going to make money? Are we going to survive? Is this recession hurting us? All of that is out of their minds. All they have to do is focus on their job.

Q: How does ownership grade itself on these initiatives?

A: The survey results from the Best Places to Work employee survey are what we consider the owner's report card. Larry, Kevin and I, we judge our performance by how the staff viewed what they were doing in the company and how they viewed us as leaders. That's more important to us than the growth of the bottom line.

Q: Do you discuss these results with your employees?

A: We quarterly review last year's results with our whole team and we say, 'Last year you judged us low on recognition. How do you want to be recognized? Where are we missing the recognition factor?'

Some of their answers were phenomenal and very simple to do. But it satisfied that emotional need for recognition. So if we aren't consciously doing that, that's where that report card helps.

We hold ourselves extremely responsible for the well being of our staff. If they're not happy, we're not happy. If they're not doing well, then it's not good for us.

Q: How does your culture differ from others?

A: It's too bad that in corporate America today, it's all about the new golden rule of whoever has the gold rules. We grew up where the golden rule was treat others how you want to be treated, and we never forgot that.

Q: Is there an over-arching management philosophy you believe in?

A: Intelligent human beings like to be led, not managed. I'm sure you don't like your superiors telling you every hour and day what you need to do and what you have to get done. People like to be told, 'Here is the path, figure out how to get down that path.' At least self-motivated people do.