

Why happy employees are good for business

Vancouver law firm Bull, Housser & Tupper has been recognized for its attention to the “people” side of the business for three consecutive years. It was recently named one of the Top 50 small- and medium-sized employers in the country by the Queen’s Centre for Business Venturing in conjunction with HR consulting company Hewitt Associates. The winners were chosen based on worker engagement.

Managing partner Herb Isherwood and human resources manager Ann Johnston spoke to PracticeLink about how BH&T keeps employees engaged and why it’s so important.

1. Building a successful business

Law firms need to pay attention to employee engagement for one simple reason, Isherwood says. “We’re developing future partners,” he points out. That means creating an environment that sells the rewards of private practice as a career path and where associates are told what it takes to



achieve partnership. “Law firms have not done a good job of selling private practice as a good place,” he observes. “Creating the right environment helps the firm succeed by developing equity partners.”

At BH&T, this includes an “outstanding” performance management program, open dialogue about reward systems, walking the talk on work-life balance, and keeping the lines of communication open.

BH&T also recognizes the importance of engaged, happy staff (the firm has 100 lawyers and 150 support staff) to the success of the firm. Front-line staff are the “face of the firm” and help build

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Herb Isherwood, Managing Partner, BH&T

client relationships, so it is equally important to create a healthy working environment in which they can flourish, says Johnston.

2. The importance of buy-in

Whether it’s giving associates a voice in devising a new bonus structure or holding a firm-wide meeting to discuss the impact of a brutal recession, nothing builds investment in the success of the firm like communication. “The amount of detail we give allows people to buy into what they’re getting into,” says Johnston. “We want them to become owners.”

Communication becomes even more important in bad times, Isherwood says.

In 2009, for example, the firm knew that the economic downturn rocking the world would affect its bottom line, and employees were worried about the future. “It dawned on me that, out of respect for them, we needed to meet with them and let them know what was going on in the firm,” Isherwood says. The firm laid it on the line: it believed the downturn was an aberration, it was not going to make short-sighted decisions, and it had no plans for layoffs. But it did have plans to make some cost-savings and it couldn’t rule out other possibilities. “The message was, ‘It’s business as usual. We’ve learned how to weather storms,’” Johnston says.

“It was received very well,” she recalls. “People were able to get back to work.” And when the firm downsized through attrition, employees pitched in “gladly.”

The firm also keeps the lines of communication open in good times: Associates are kept in the loop at an annual general meeting where the firm shares profit numbers and general information about partners’ salaries. Dinner out on the firm’s dime every quarter builds camaraderie among the associates and fosters engagement.

The firm also holds regular town hall meetings with support staff to keep employees posted on firm strategy and basic financial information. “I can’t tell you the trust and goodwill that builds,” Johnston says. It makes employees “thoroughly invested in the success of the firm.”

3. Going the extra mile

Like many firms, BH&T says it’s committed to helping

employees achieve work-life balance. It offers programs such as flex-time to accommodate people who need a different schedule. But it goes one step further. “We don’t wait for them to ask,” says Isherwood. The firm proactively identifies employees who might benefit from a different work arrangement — a single parent for example — and encourages them to come forward. The firm also actively creates mentoring opportunities by matching senior partners with associates.

4. Cultivating talent

BH&T has established a sophisticated performance management system. An outside consultant is brought in to provide a “non-judgmental safe place for real conversation” and practice leaders are involved to ensure that everyone understands what is required. But it’s equally important to pay attention to employees who are flourishing, says Isherwood. Don’t ignore the development needs of high performers and focus only on employees with



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Human Resources Manager

performance issues, he says.

Support staff have the option of having a lawyer sit in and give feedback during their yearly evaluations. There is a bonus system in place for support staff and the firm works hard to promote people from within, Johnston says.

5. Taking the time to do it right

Building a culture of fairness and respect — the underpinnings of employee engagement — doesn’t happen overnight: BH&T had a 10-year plan. “Do it over time, be consistent, treat people fairly, and treat them with respect, always,” Johnston says.

— Beverley Spencer

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