

USE 'CONTAGIOUS FUN' TO DEVELOP A GREAT COMPANY CULTURE

A well-defined and supportive culture can result in great company success, increased productivity, and a top-notch patient experience.

BY ARSEN GRIGORYAN, MBA, COE

We often speak about the patient experience in ophthalmology. The question that must be asked and answered is: What creates a great patient experience? The answer can be found by taking a deep dive into the employee experience and by developing a positive company culture.

At Harvard Eye Associates, one of our pillars of belief is what we call *contagious fun*. We believe that, when staff members enjoy their time at work, their enthusiasm permeates the clinical atmosphere and translates into an exceptional patient experience. Let's take a closer look at employee experience and company culture by answering three main questions.

QUESTION NO. 1: WHAT IS A GREAT COMPANY CULTURE?

A great company culture produces a staff with high morale, enthusiasm, and visionary excellence in performance. In this setting, all employees are willing to pass along their knowledge to other employees, and they do so cheerfully.

The culture of a company can motivate employees or leave them disconnected. When employees are focused on simply getting from 8 am to 5 pm, it creates an atmosphere of apathy that is quickly noticed by patients and new hires. When employees are not invested in their work and do only the bare minimum, the quality of their work is often low, and errors in the health care industry can be costly and dangerous. A disconnected

employee spreads negativity, which can become corrosive to productivity and patient care.

The contrast would be a company culture that supports positivity, encourages employees, and empowers them to rise above the status quo and take pride in their work. In our experience, once a positive culture gains momentum, it begins to abide by the law of inertia (although maintenance is always needed).

When an employee struggles or has a conflict, it is best to take the time to listen and genuinely understand his or her perspective, but it doesn't stop there: Sustainable solutions that encourage a struggling employee to succeed must be developed. When employees recognize that the company is invested in their success, it fosters a team mentality. When the team works together and takes a constructive approach instead of a destructive approach, it sets the tone for success.

QUESTION NO. 2: WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HAVING A GREAT COMPANY CULTURE?

The benefits of an exceptional company culture are both quantitative and qualitative (see list below). In short, high employee morale increases productivity because personnel are motivated to work. This further translates into a better patient experience because patients interact with happier and more motivated employees.

COMPONENTS OF AN EXCEPTIONAL COMPANY CULTURE

QUANTITATIVE

- ▶ Greater productivity
- ▶ Reduction in turnover

QUALITATIVE

- ▶ Fun environment for employees
- ▶ Better patient experience
- ▶ Better team camaraderie

Increased productivity can be achieved with a great company culture because motivated employees are more likely to rise above their job expectations and to fulfill the company's core missions. Additionally, when company culture permits management to be more approachable, employees are more likely to communicate their needs effectively and to understand decisions being made within the company. This can ultimately result in a higher employee retention rate.

Cultivating a fun environment for employees helps them to look forward to coming to work every day and can decrease unexpected absences. Their enthusiasm tends to be noticed by patients, who are then more likely to enjoy their experiences and refer others to the practice. Moreover, as employees interact positively with each other, micromanagement by higher-ups generally becomes less necessary.

QUESTION NO. 3: HOW CAN WE DEVELOP A GREAT COMPANY CULTURE?

The first step is to secure buy-in from the key stakeholders within the company. There will likely be skepticism initially. Some will argue that the current company culture is good enough, and it will take persistence and time for the newer, better culture to germinate. Once the seed is planted in the minds of the stakeholders, these individuals must work to establish company core competencies. These pillars of belief should be posted in a location within the building that is accessible to both employees and patients, and they should also be published online.

The management team must then practically develop the company's beliefs, which should include the principles of contagious fun and focused accountability. The pillars of belief should focus as much on the employee experience as on the patient experience. As issues arise at the staff level, managers must not react viscerally. Constructive solutions can take time.



Figure 1. Mr. Grigoryan and two other staff members of Harvard Eye Associates enjoy an office pizza party.

OPERATIONAL ISSUES

No company is free of common operational issues, including problems with employee attendance, lack of productivity, undertrained employees, and poor attitudes. A positive company culture, however, can foster resolutions. For instance, an employee who is frequently tardy will likely come to the attention of a manager. This manager could react viscerally by calling in the employee and demanding that he or she come to work on time, but that reaction will likely be unhelpful. A manager who has internalized the company's core beliefs would track the employee's attendance to look for patterns. After recognizing a pattern, the manager could start a dialogue with the employee to see how he or she is. This approach provides the employee with an opportunity to share any struggles that he or she may have.

TEAM BUILDING

It is important to recognize employees for the great work that they are doing. This practice encourages others on staff to rise to meet that level of service. At Harvard Eye Associates, we release a monthly *kudos* newsletter, organized into various categories, to highlight employees who have gone above and beyond expectations.

Another strategy for team building is to regularly organize a variety of events to show the company's appreciation for its employees. These events can range from pizza parties (Figure 1), to handing out gift cards for ice cream, to go-kart racing (Figure 2), and even to a beach day with fun activities.

CONCLUSION

Daily operational issues occur, but company culture determines how they are resolved. Taking the time to develop a great company culture will help a practice to retain exceptional employees and, in turn, to provide an exceptional patient experience. ■



ARSEN
GRIGORYAN,
MBA, COE

- Director of Operations, Harvard Eye Associates, Laguna Hills, San Clemente, and Orange, California
- agrigoryan@harvardeye.com
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Figure 2. Photos from a go-kart racing event hosted by Harvard Eye Associates for its employees.

