Culture Redefined
Elevating productivity, collaboration (& fun)

by: Brent Hoskins, Office Technology Magazine

Every office technology dealership has its own company culture. However, it may not be all that good. How is the culture in your dealership? Is it what you want it to be? Do your employees look forward to coming to work each day or dread it? Here are profiles of three BTA member dealerships focused on how they redefined their cultures.

Applied Innovation

In 2012, Applied Innovation, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, celebrated its 25th anniversary. The dealership's founder and now CEO, John Lowery, had the idea of celebrating the year, in part, by way of Applied's employees serving 2,500 hours in volunteer service over the course of the year. "That was our way of giving back to the communities we served for the 25 years we had been blessed to be in business," he says. "We didn't do the 2,500 hours — we did 3,750 hours." Now in its 38th year — with nearly 600 employees across 17 locations — the volunteering at Applied continues. "Last year we did 8,000-plus volunteer hours."

This ongoing commitment to community service through employee volunteerism is among the varied reflections of the company culture in place at Applied, the result of a concerted effort that began in 2009. That effort ultimately led to the launch of Applied Chemistry, which uses the "Elements of Success" — a variation of the periodic table of elements — as a guide to ensure the dealership remains focused on its values, setting the stage for the desired culture. For example, among Applied's 12 core Elements of Success: "community" (Cm); "build team unity" (Btu); and "fun" (Fn). As part of this initiative, the dealership promotes: "By focusing on decisions that benefit our clients and employees, our commitment to the community and having fun, we've created a culture we are proud to encourage across our many locations."

Any visitor to Applied's headquarters will see the 12 core Elements of Success displayed in the lobby, incorporated into a "living wall" of plants, Lowery explains. "Inside your organization, you want your culture to be living — to be alive," he says. "Our 'living wall' is representative of what we want with our culture."

In support of the Elements of Success and the resulting company culture, "every single employee in the organization is taught to be a storyteller," Lowery says, citing daily experiences that tie to the elements. "Throughout your work at Applied, you are going to experience an 'integrity' [In] moment, a 'success by selection' [Sbs] moment, a 'creativity' [Cr] moment, etc. We want you to weave that into the story. For example, if an employee finds that a customer has been overbilled in error, when we make it right, that's an integrity moment ... The employee can then share that story with others. That's how we perpetuate who we are and why we do what we do."

As the creation of the Elements of Success illustrates, the key to having the right company culture is to be "intentional" in its development, says Casey Lowery, president at Applied. Either way, a culture will be in place, he says. "It's just a matter of whether or not you want your fingerprints on it," he says. "If leaders are not intentional, the culture is not necessarily bad, but it may not be the culture you want. If you are not setting the tone and being intentional about it, it's easy for your company culture to get derailed."

Casey emphasizes that being intentional with culture has paid off at Applied. "One benefit, certainly, is reflected in our low employee turnover rate," he says. "Even during the 'Great Resignation,' our numbers were well below the national average in terms of people changing jobs. There's no question that our culture has helped to keep our turnover rate low."

In addition, the culture contributes to the "quality of life" of Applied's employees, Casey says. "It's my job, as a steward of the business, to make it a great place to come to work; happy people will take good care of customers," he says. "Our customer satisfaction is directly driven by the fact that we spend a lot of time and energy on our culture."

John further emphasizes the point. "I give tours around the office and people will say, 'How do you guys get anything done? It seems like everybody's laughing and having a fun

time.' And I say, 'I'll match our productivity against anybody else's in the country.' If people are enjoying what they're doing and they're having fun, they're going to be much more productive."

Document Solutions Inc.

Around seven years ago, Document Solutions Inc. (DSI) surveyed its employees seeking their opinions on working for the Albuquerque, New Mexico-based, dealership, "because we didn't know what we didn't know," says Phil Houser, CEO. "We were not thrilled with the results. It was very humbling … That was the catalyst for change — putting ourselves out there, identifying the pitfalls and areas where we were falling short." The culture at DSI has changed considerably since then. This year the dealership was voted among Albuquerque's "Top Workplaces" for the fourth year in a row.

The cultural change at DSI has been driven primarily by ensuring the right people are on the team and that they are aligned with the company's five core values. The values (listed with DSI's explanations): accountability ("We own our results, from start to finish."); integrity ("We do the right thing because it's the right thing to do."); passionability ("We are eccentrically committed to partnership successes."); selfless service ("We provide proactive best-in-class service even when inconvenient to self."); and positivity ("One of the few things we have control over is our attitude.").

"Defining our core values as what we believe in, what we want to stand by and then holding ourselves accountable has made a huge difference at DSI," Houser says. "It has propelled us forward. Once you define what good looks like and what the expectations are, you will have everybody rowing in the same direction."

The culture transition was not an easy task. If even one employee does not align with the dealership's core values, that person "can be toxic, destroying the culture," says Jocelyn Gorman, DSI president. "So, we went from 73 employees to 58 employees [working across eight locations]. That has a lot to do with having the right person in the right seat and aligning with our values — drawing a line in the sand. Those employees who were not aligned with our core values, purpose and passion were moved in a different direction."

Houser recalls that one of the individuals included in the downsizing was a 15-year employee. "That person reported directly to me, did so much for our company and I still think the world of that person today, but the employee was very

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disruptive to our company," he says. "That was one of the most difficult decisions, but also one of the most positive."

Today, through interviews and assessment tests, DSI ensures that all new hires are the right fit for the culture. "Core value alignment is nonnegotiable," Gorman says. "Are they a good team fit? We teach people tasks, metrics and how the industry flows, but when it is clear that job applicants won't jive with the team and lean into our core values as their standards, they are not hired."

Essentially, all of DSI's employees can "recite our core values because we post them, live them and talk about them," Houser says. "Every month we have a wrap-up meeting, and we always talk about a core value and share examples of people living that value within the company. I could share example after example of selfless service."

Gorman says the positive culture at DSI is palpable. "What's cool is that if you visited DSI on a Monday, you would see that people are excited about it being a Monday; a Monday feels like a Friday," she says. "There is energy, positivity and an observable willingness to work together. Our people are excited and eager to do what they're hardwired to do." Alignment with the shared values "generates behaviors," she continues. "And those behaviors are in practice daily, whether you're in front of a customer or helping a team member."

The enthusiasm shared by Houser and Gorman regarding DSI's culture clearly reflects a new beginning for the dealership since those "very humbling" employee survey results years ago. "We have a whole new leadership team that is driving initiatives and changes, from where we were to where we are going," Houser says. "It's an exciting time for our company; we expect to double in size over the next three to four years."

Fisher's Technology

Looking back, Chris Taylor, CEO of Fisher's Technology, says there was a day when the culture at the Boise, Idaho-based dealership was far less than ideal. "We didn't provide a great customer experience," he says. "Our culture, at the time, was more about cost containment and profitability. Ironically, we weren't very profitable. It's difficult to grow a business when your employees and customers are not happy."

That was 19 years ago. Fisher's has since transformed its culture. In fact, the dealership (now with 15 locations and 200-plus employees) even provides training for its customers on building company culture. How did Fisher's make

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the cultural transition? "First, we picked a unifying theme — 'happy customers,'" Taylor says. "We said it over and over again, and used it for our guide in all decisions, investments and messaging."

Second, Fisher's "hired to that messaging," Taylor says. "We hired for culture. We made sure we were hiring people who belonged here, who wanted to take great care of customers. That hiring process is still our most important process today."

Third, Fisher's adopted a focus of curiosity and having open minds, Taylor says. "It is really important to continually listen to our customers and our team members for ways to get better and better," he says. "Culturally, that was very important for our turnaround and it is still important today."

Fourth, Taylor says, "while our mission was our customers and happiness, our obsession became our team — putting our team members first, not just in the hiring process, but in investing in them, making sure they are happy, growing and all the things it takes to have engaged team members."

The fifth step was the move to an "obsession with our culture," Taylor says. "That is, how our team members work together — team together. So, being effective together to make sure we don't lose that culture over time."

Today, visitors to Fisher's comment on the company's culture. "We hear it all the time," Taylor says. "We hear things like: 'Your team is buzzing around here, excited to do what they do and excited to greet somebody new to the building' and 'We feel this highly positive, energetic, excited culture when we walk into your office.'"

Strong cultures are "felt the minute someone walks into the office," Taylor continues. "It's almost that the culture 'oozes from every pore' of the company. It's not necessarily what someone posts on their wall or website; it's the values that the team members feel and experience every day when they go to work."

Taylor provides advice for any dealer seeking to build a better culture. "Start with the end in mind," he says. "Start with defining what culture you ultimately want. What do you want

it to feel like when you walk into your building? What do you want your customer to perceive about your team?"

In order to prompt ideas for building culture, Taylor shares six attributes of "a great culture." He reflects those attributes in the form of what an employee in a company with a great culture would say: (1) "My company cares about me as a person"; (2) "I trust and respect my leadership"; (3) "I feel appreciated and recognized when I do good work"; (4) "We have a spirit of cooperation"; (5) "Leadership is open to input from employees"; and (6) "I understand how the company is doing financially."

For any dealer thinking "that's what I want my culture to be," keep in mind that the employee comments would be "aspirational" of what the dealer is seeking to build over time,

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Taylor says, emphasizing the importance of "setting clear expectations for everyone" in building the desired culture. "Ask, 'What does that mean going forward? What does it mean to be living in that culture?' Then, hammer [the resulting] messaging over and over again."

Taylor adds a final piece of advice. "Never allow any behaviors that are contrary" to the vision and values instilled in the desired culture, he says. "If you tolerate behaviors outside of the culture you want, you're not going to create that culture." ■

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