

Creating a micro culture

How to align departmental and corporate visions **By Rick Kuharik**

Imagine a team where every employee is engaged, energized and empowered. Team members are totally aligned with the organization's visions, goals and objectives. Individuals fully understand the customers, and together they contribute to meet or exceed their needs. In the end, the group's bottom-line results meet or exceed corporate growth and profitability projections.

Does this sound too good to be true? It can become a reality by developing a micro culture.

A micro culture is a subculture created to align and fully support the visions, goals and strategies of the members of a department or group of like departments. The micro culture must be exciting and purposeful. But a word of caution: Employees must be pulled into the culture, not pushed.

The stage

I manage a premium audit department for a regional insurance company where our 30-member team consists of auditors, technicians and a service processing staff. Our staff, along with 12 vendor audit companies, performs audits for our commercial policyholders as an underwriting service.

Our department goals were very clear, but we needed to align ourselves with the organization's goals of profitability and growth. This was a daunting task, especially for a department steeped in rules and structure.

It was clear that premium audit had to become a value-added service through a focus on our customer. But first we had to make certain that the resources responsible for this change were ready for the task. We had to have more than just new goals and objectives; we needed some real spirit.

Just the FACTs

We concentrated first on our product, a premium audit. We had too many measurements for success. We had to simplify success into one statement, one word that would capture the value of our product. We boiled down our value statements into "FACT" audits.

Our premium audits are Fair, Accurate, Cost-effective and Timely. These are the measurements of a successful audit, and it is now what every member of our team strives to accomplish — just the FACTs.



This philosophy is shared with our vendors, as well. When vendors visit our customers on our behalf, it is a seamless business visit.

Enter AWA

We also created an attitude that empowers our employees to make decisions — especially in the face of change — and realign themselves quickly without a top-down directive. This new attitude included a customer-focus philosophy with a mantra of service. We needed more than just empty talk; we needed to create a shared purpose.

This purpose was phrased simply, "Audit With Attitude," or AWA.

We fashioned AWA into a voodoo-masked character icon. His expression of dissatisfaction is just that — dissatisfaction with the status quo and a push to raise the bar. What we do today will not satisfy our tomorrow.

AWA is displayed throughout our department as a constant reminder of our new attitude, focus and alignment. It shows up at department celebrations and parties where we share our successes. It is an omnipresent, almost cult-like spirit, which makes it so powerful. The image draws many curious inquiries from those outside the department. Our explanation drives our point and reinforces the entire concept.

Results

AWA and FACT audits are a constant reminder of our micro culture. They represent a way to animate our alignment with our organizational goals, so we don't lose sight of our purpose. The micro culture allows employees to rally around a common vision. Because it is simple, it can be realigned as the business landscape changes.

Employees have an entrepreneurial spirit when their contributions affect the bottom line and they can easily connect the dots. There is definitely personal ownership that enriches their work as they become engaged in their contributions. The department's stature is elevated as successes are shared among customers, business partners and peers. The positive press elevates and promotes the stature of the department, allowing a richer base of solid candidates who want to be a part of the team.

One of the greatest results is that it brought some fun to the workplace. Employees who are engaged, connected, excited and empowered are going to pass their attitude on to our customers.

Start it up

The creation of a micro culture starts with leadership. It is a top-down approach to build bottom-up result.

What is missing in your culture? Are you aligned at every level with your vision, goals and objectives? Are there simple success factors that will support sharing a common purpose?

RICK KUHARIK, director of risk services, has been aligning insurance skills for 20 years. Reach him at (330) 887-0401 or richardkuhrik@westfieldgrp.com. In business for more than 157

years, Westfield Insurance provides commercial and personal insurance services to customers in 17 states. Represented by leading independent insurance agencies, Westfield's promise of protection is supported by a commitment to service excellence. For more information, visit Westfield at www.westfieldinsurance.com.



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