

*Excellence can be obtained if you care more than others think is wise, risk more than others think is safe, dream more than others think is practical and expect more than others think is possible.*

*Anonymous*

The "Best Places to Work" are organizations where employees exhibit a sense of pride, are willing to stretch beyond their perceived capabilities, and are heavily invested in the well being of the company - even, and especially, in uncertain times. As a result, employees are more motivated to give their best, and are more resilient during downturns. This elevated spirit is the equivalent of skimming a flat stone across a clear lake, creating a series of concentric circles that reach wide and deep within the company and far beyond its borders -- to its customers, applicants, competitors, and community.

What ingredients are essential to being designated a "Best Place to Work"? Our experience has repeatedly highlighted nine factors. They include:

**An authentic spirit of trust.**

Trust is the cornerstone of any successful organization. It reduces uncertainty, fosters direct communication, limits double-talk and second-guessing, promotes a culture of integrity, and increases the effectiveness of making things happen.

**The ability to take prudent risks.**

We don't equate risk with uncertainty. We view it as recognizing the laws of opportunity and probability. Those who truly understand their business take intelligent risks. The net effect is that people gain by not being afraid to lose.

**A can-do attitude that promotes pragmatic optimism.**

This is a critical factor that challenges the risk-averse person and naysayer. It energizes the organization and moves innovative ideas that might otherwise languish, into dynamic actions that can be measured.

**The capacity to manage the fundamentals.**

In Best organizations, there is a focus on core strengths and talents: setting the course, prioritizing the essentials and selecting those most capable of delivering the

goods. Assignments are given to people with a strong history of accountability and responsibility as well as a proven track record.

**The courage to make, acknowledge and repair mistakes.**

Mistakes are unavoidable threads woven into the fabric of our lives. None of us escapes this fate, no matter how smart, confident or cautious we are. A confident organization will trust a reliable person to make a mistake. They appreciate that this is part of a learning attitude that has the potential of converting a mistake into a portal of discovery that can lead to new opportunities.

**A Commitment to Work with Others.**

People are empowered by other people, respect their differences, and become their best when they cooperate and share the spoils. Mutual respect eschews narcissistic behavior and the dog-eat-dog competitive system of winners and losers.

**Develop a Diverse Team.**

A Best company includes people with different backgrounds as well as the full spectrum of those at different points in the lifecycle. Such different experiences and cognitive mindsets create an exciting culture that fosters innovation and pays enormous dividends.

**Reward successful projects.**

Good work should be acknowledged in a timely manner with appropriate rewards. Celebrate milestones and, whenever possible, customize the reward so it has meaning and value to the recipient. Rewards need not be expensive; they simply need to resonate for the people being rewarded.

**A safe work environment - physically, mentally, and spiritually - with zero tolerance.**

This includes a policy that has teeth and spells no favoritism, no bullying, and no harassment. Bullying is not limited to the schoolyard; there are plenty of bullies in the workplace. A safe work environment involves treating people with respect and dignity. No one, regardless of title, should be immune to this policy. A lax attitude regarding personal safety sets the stage for a toxic work environment.

To sustain a company as a "Best Place to Work" requires a deep, ongoing commitment from strong leaders who are willing and able to serve as role models. An organization doesn't need spectacular or expensive ideas to be the "Best". Any company with a sincere desire to do so can be a Best Place to Work, even in a challenging economy. Jon Gardner, the former head of Common Cause, hit the nail on the head: "Excellence is doing ordinary things extraordinarily well."