

Insight

Published March 2010

Vitamin T: Talent at Morrison

Daniel Margolis

Morrison Management Specialists meets the nutritional needs of the nation's patients via a large workforce that's kept happy, healthy and growing.

People in need of health care also need to be fed, and Morrison Management Specialists makes sure that they are. Morrison provides food, nutrition and dining services to 450 different hospitals and a total of 900 different locations, including senior living communities. Reaching out to a population this large requires just as large of a workforce, of course, and Morrison numbers more than 16,000 employees. Add individuals not on Morrison's payroll but accessing its training and that number swells to 24,000.

According to Andrea Seidl, senior vice president at Morrison, this requires an approach to talent management designed in line with the empathetic nature of health care itself.

TM: Describe Morrison's approach to talent management.

Seidl: First of all, what drives our organizational culture is our passion and caring for people. The reason [for that] is if you take care of your people, they will take care of the organization. So, if you're going to take care of your people, you have to care about their future. We are big believers and proponents of [talent management firm] Career Systems International's (CSI) [retention advice book] Love 'Em or Lose 'Em and all of the concepts surrounding that. We train every new manager in our organization on Love 'Em or Lose 'Em because that's how we want them to behave toward our associates. So how does that translate to talent management? Clearly, if you're going to be following the tenets laid out in Love 'Em or Lose 'Em, you've got to care about [your employees'] future, and so that engages you in their future. In other words, we want to know what people want to do, and we want to help them get there. And we feel that the benefit of that is that they want to stay with us [and] grow with us. So if they are willing and allow us to create a path for them, and they're willing to follow that path, how much better are we? Because we now have internal people who are already ingrained in the organization, filling future positions, and they're also rewarded for that.

TM: What processes or programs have you established to improve the performance of the entire workforce?

Seidl: We have standards for everything that we do, and our standards are clarified in such a way that there is no mistaking what the expectations are. We train on those standards and reinforce those standards through business plans that are available at each location, and those business plans are put together based on our operational review, which is a comprehensive review of every service we provide and whether or not we're meeting our standards. Where we're not meeting our standards, the managers are encouraged to set their priority of what they're going to do to get there and then put it into the business plan.

TM: How is performance management linked to the strategic objectives of Morrison?

Seidl: We have a balanced scorecard that we use to measure our results, and [it] consists of financial information, turnover and satisfaction in four levels — associate engagement, retail customer satisfaction, patient satisfaction and client satisfaction.

TM: How does Morrison work to change or create leadership and management behaviors that lead to optimal workforce performance?

Seidl: Training, development plans, coaching, and when we have someone who is really struggling, we'll [make an active effort] to get them back on track. We've actually done what we call an intervention, where we have a manager who may be doing well on the hard metrics but not doing well on the softer metrics of taking care of people and things like that. We've actually used CSI to help us with those metrics. We'll do leadership development for people who are struggling. The reverse of that is people who do great with the associates, but holding them accountable is a challenge whenever there's some pushback, and we develop those folks to be able to do both.

TM: How does Morrison develop organizational culture and employee attitudes to optimize workforce performance?

Seidl: The way we develop our culture is that our leaders walk the talk and expect everyone to walk the talk. We make everything our own, so nothing's a program because a program implies that there's a beginning and an end to it, and we want everything we do to become ingrained in our culture. We go down our path, and then we live that path and we reinforce our messages. We also use storytelling a great deal. We have a process of recognizing our hourly associates for the extraordinary things that they do called People First. And so these stories are submitted by the field. They actually started when we'd get a letter saying something really terrific [about the staff], and one of our admins said, "You know, we really need to start collecting these things." The first year we had 73, and this past year we had 7,000 stories submitted. From those 7,000, we'll select 12 of those people. These stories will rip your heart out; they're stories of saving lives, pulling people from fires and things like that — all in the course of doing their job. Then, at our annual meeting, [those employees] are granted a life dream of theirs.

TM: How does Morrison use learning and development to manage talent?

Seidl: We use a database to know where everybody is and where their performance scores are and where they need development. We also go through a process of identifying high performers that we might target for some specific elevated development that might position them for two levels up. In a nutshell, training is everything. We feel that training is a profit center because it's what contributes to profit.

TM: What processes or programs have you established to attract, recruit and retain top talent?

Seidl: We have no problem with retention. We're not as good as I would like us to be from a track-and-recruit piece, and the reason we're not as good at that is we don't do a lot of marketing of ourselves. Part of our culture is that we do what we say we're going to do [and] we don't talk about what we're going to do, and we're trying to strike a balance. We want to do a better job at that, but candidly, we're not struggling to find people because in our industry there's a network of people that are learning about us.

TM: How do you use assessments to manage Morrison's talent?

Seidl: Everyone gets an annual appraisal, period. That's absolute. When the reviews are done, at the management level there are challenge sessions. Let's say I'm an RVP [regional vice president] and my RDOs [regional directors of operations] have the reviews done for each of the unit directors. I then would have a challenge session with all of my RDOs. We'd go through the reviews, and if there's someone that's extraordinarily low, we start talking about what we need to do to help that person improve. Sometimes they're not going to improve; that happens. And then if we have people that are rated highly, we want to talk about if they're positioned for further success and [if] we [are] sure that they're getting the opportunity to

succeed.

TM: How do you handle succession planning at Morrison?

Seidl: On all of our management reviews, I, for example, am asked who I identify as a successor for me within a year, and who I would identify as a successor for me within three to five years. So the individual being evaluated is expected to have identified someone who could be their successor, and then, as you're reviewing it with your supervisor, you discuss it. You discuss: "OK, so why are you picking this person? What are you doing to get them ready? Are they ready now? What do we do if you're not moving into a new position?" Then we have the overall talent management sessions, where each RVP meets with the division vice president and some other talent managers going through the high performers in their area. [These are] people who may not have been identified specifically for positions in that area, but who should be considered to be successors elsewhere.

TM: How have your workforce performance management activities contributed to Morrison's bottom line?

Seidl: Now, you know the economy. We have had our best financial year ever. Ever. And if you look at the graph of our finances since we started on this, it's like a 45-degree angle in both our top-line revenue and our bottom-line profit. At the same time, every satisfaction measure we have has gone up at about that same angle, and conversely, our turnover has gone down. Every single metric we have is going in the right direction and we have firmly concluded that it's linked [to workforce performance management activities].

TM: What's next for Morrison in terms of talent management and workforce performance development?

Seidl: First of all, our pursuit really is operational excellence. And we know that that's the ultimate goal, and we know that talent management and development is an integral part to that, and we also know that you never get there, and you have to keep working on it. So every year we look at: "OK, what's the next step we can take to get further on down this path?" Our next step is making it fully pervasive in 900 facili



Daniel Margolis is a managing editor for Talent Management magazine.