

Digging Up Profits: Unique Workplace, Universal Lessons

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What is this man doing? We've all seen them: guys on the side of the road, looking through a little hole on top of a tripod.

Until recently, I never knew anyone who did this. But recently I met someone who'd had a career in this field. And here's what I learned – not just what he did and the commercial value, but how workers in this challenging field can be successfully managed.

So what can managers - in any industry - learn from how he's managed? And why is this critically important?

The Problem

Every company needs to align the interests of managers and workers. Striking a reasonable balance between those interests can be tough – some writers have called the act of aligning people the hardest task in management. Failure to align well can be catastrophic: If misalignment gets severe, the company will go off the rails, hurting everyone.

For example, when sales people feel like they're not being treated fairly, they may pad their expenses. This is human nature: when people feel they're not being taken care of, they take care of themselves.

Such actions create hidden costs when staff do things like splurging on expensive meals, staying an extra night in a hotel to get a *per diem*, failing to take care of company equipment, or taking an unnecessary sick day. Any one of these items, repeated across a workforce over time, can generate thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars of invisible expenses, every single year.

For instance, imagine a team of 8 out in the field, each spending an extra night in a hotel on a week's trip. If done once, that would cost the company \$880. If done every week for a month it becomes \$3500; if done every week for 52 weeks, the total outlay is a whopping \$42,000.

Such costs can be hard to spot as illegitimate and can be a significant drain on company finances. Without even realizing it, the company can shed dollars at an alarming rate.

Avoiding situations like that – by actively ensuring alignment between managers and workers – is critically important for every company.

The Business Situation

The employee in the picture at the top is a surveyor. He is using a state-of-the-art “LiDAR” device. This “Light Detection and Ranging” system uses laser light to measure large distances instantly and precisely, to provide critical land mapping information. The value for clients is to build roads, make mining plans, and assess how much more rock can be removed from quarries – to wind up as a new office building or as gravel in your driveway. Surveying is a mix of intense physical and mental work that’s challenging but can also give great satisfaction and accomplishment.

What’s the demographic of most people in this role? Surveyors are generally early - to mid-career, high school-educated men. Some have previous construction experience, but for some surveying is their first consistent work experience in a job that offers a long career path that can include transitioning to industries like construction and civil engineering.

Surveyors can work up to 17 hours a day. They’re usually on-site from 6:30am to 5:00pm followed by a 1- to 2-hour drive to the next town, then 2 to 4 hours of administration work such as preparing and uploading files until nearly midnight.

Compensation for these roles starts around \$40k/yr. and ranges up to \$65k/yr. for experience. Hourly staff may receive an additional day or more of pay if they finish a project early. Larger companies may offer benefits, while smaller ones may instead offer profit-sharing bonuses.



The Foundation of Company Culture

This case study focuses on a small LiDar surveying company that consistently kept clients and employees happy, and enjoyed significant business success. Over the years, senior management developed 5 key values to ensure that their surveyors were engaged, productive and retained:

1. Work is fun
2. People want to do the right thing
3. Leadership creates the right conditions
4. Leaders look after people
5. Leaders are self-aware and thoughtful.

None of this may seem like rocket science. And it's not. But the consistent application of these ideas makes all the difference in bringing a company's culture to life:

- When work is fun, it's a gift, a blank canvas onto which meaning can be projected.
- Recognizing that people want to make a positive impact and have good intent helps everyone understand that mistakes are unintentional, and builds lasting trust.

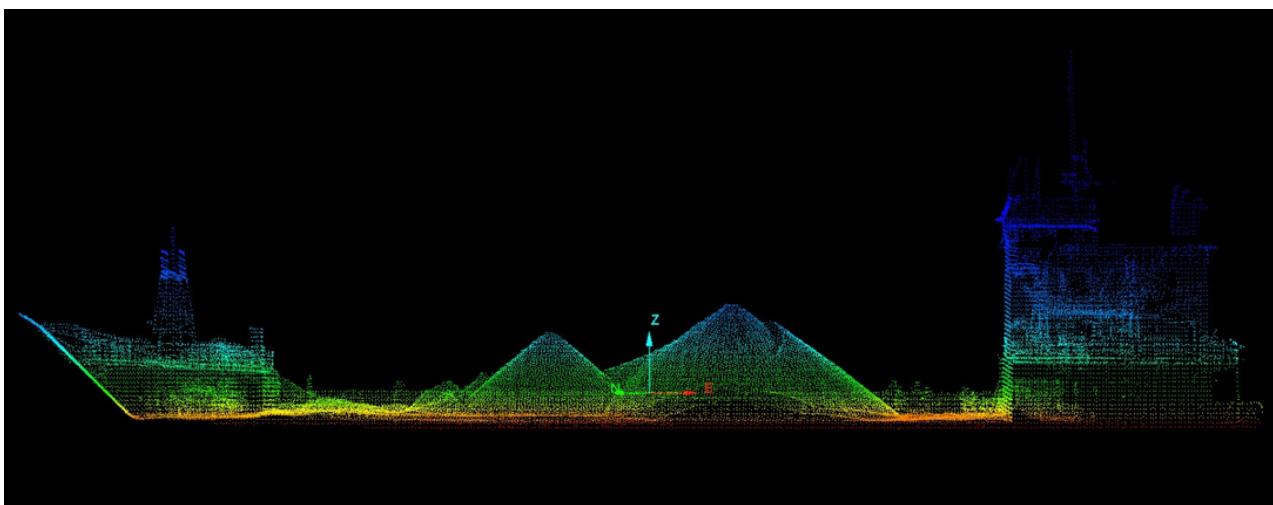
- Leaders can anticipate and act to remove barriers for their workers, including knowing when to “tell” or when to “ask,” and how much autonomy to grant.
- If leaders don’t take care of their people, people will take care of themselves; when people feel they aren’t treated right, they’ll justify doing what they think is right for them.
- Leaders know that “how you see is what you see”: their own filters can alter the way they see others, so they need to be conscious of their own biases and act to counter those.



How Leaders Implemented Company Culture

Managers implemented the 5 key values above in a variety of ways:

1. "Work is fun." Work was respected by celebrating it. A weekly e-mail newsletter highlighted great performances of the week and gave stats, making clear that hard work was seen, remembered, and honored. This also helped staff working in the field stay connected to the whole team and see how their individual performances fit in the big picture.
2. "People want to do the right thing." Managers clearly and repeatedly communicated company culture and the requirements for project success. Managers empowered employees to organize their time and make their own daily decisions, consistent with the company culture and a simple "4 Question Filter": *Is it safe? Is it accurate? Is it efficient? Is it repeatable?*
3. "Leadership creates the right conditions." Managers protected high performers and company culture by removing those who would not align with the culture. Managers made sure to provide staff with the best equipment available, including backup supplies. In addition, managers didn't move the finish line: If work was done to spec in less time than expected, employees got the saved time as personal time; any additional work was assigned on a voluntary basis.
4. "Leaders look after people." Managers encouraged staff to eat well, tip well, and sleep well – in nice hotels. Staff could buy things needed to make their drive time safer and more comfortable.
5. "Leaders are self-aware and thoughtful." Managers embodied the company culture in every action and sought chances to sacrifice and go the extra mile for employees, even taking their place in the field when a worker's family emergency or celebration arose.



Impact on the Business

1. Solid profits
2. Satisfied and loyal clients who formed relationships with employees
3. A drama-free workplace with successful, happy employees
 - a. Not one unnecessary sick day – ever
 - b. Employees drove innovation and efficiency gains
 - c. Staff treated vehicles as “their own,” reducing truck repair costs.
 - d. Nearly non-existent breakdown rates of sensitive electronic equipment
 - e. No equipment theft or loss, or expense padding: staff routinely ate at Jimmy John’s
4. Managers, freed from “putting out fires,” could run and grow the business.



Conclusion

In a sense, leaders have to choose where they want to face costs. Managers can pinch every penny possible out of their employees. But when treated like that, staff can pinch pennies right back – not to save the company, but to figure out how to get every penny they feel they deserve, one way or another, behind the manager’s back.

The money is spent one way or another. Why not spend it in ways that makes everyone's life a little bit better, to build trust, productivity and retention?

A leader's choice is to create a culture that is either based on either: 1) the highest common denominators and watch everyone raise their performance; or 2) rules-oriented penny pinching, based on what-ifs of the lowest common denominators, only to wind up wondering why good people are consistently underperforming.

This study has shown that managers can build a positive culture that benefits everyone: workers, clients, and the company. Creating and communicating a clearly defined set of expectations and responsibilities aligns the entire company, and brings great value to everyone.

As an extra bonus in this case, the entire company was inspired by the self-reinforcing, positive culture created by consistently high-quality work that dedicated employees cranked out year after year.

Creating a company full of successful workers isn't always easy, but the approaches outlined in this paper are simple, practical, and profoundly effective: they generate real results.

Whatever your industry, these principles can light the way to creating a sustainable workplace environment that attracts the best people and delivers on your brand promise.

