

AIMING FOR Success IN SURVEYING MANAGEMENT—#3

—by Richard A. Smith, P. E.



Richard A. Smith, P. E., is president and owner of R.A. Smith National, Inc. He purchased the struggling civil engineering firm where he had been an employee in 1978, just five years out of college. Rick's vision and philosophy grew R.A. Smith from a mere 12 employees in 1978 to the third largest civil engineering and surveying firm in Wisconsin with all 250 employees and offices in Brookfield, Oshkosh, Appleton, and Madison, Wisconsin, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Smith holds a master's of science degree in civil engineering and a bachelor's of science degree in civil engineering from Marquette University. He is a registered professional engineer in the states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Georgia, Ohio, Minnesota, and North Carolina.

Leverage your firm's corporate culture to retain your best people and maximize performance

I am told by a friend that a corporate employer he once worked for implemented an interesting communications idea. The employer brought together a small group of employees for a monthly lunch with the firm president to discuss any issues employees wanted to discuss. That looked great on paper.

But at the first meeting, an employee voiced a concern shared by others throughout the organization. The president's immediate response was, "We don't need that kind of thinking around here." The employees' reaction was immediate too. They learned about an important nuance of the firm's corporate culture which quickly made its way to virtually all employees—watch what you say and don't speak too freely about your concerns. The monthly communications lunch quickly lost its appeal.

Corporate culture exists in every organization. It is an expression of values that matter most to top management in terms of core behaviors. A formal, structured effort is needed to identify, create, and maintain a supportive corporate culture. Otherwise, employee behaviors will be random and can jeopardize the achievement of company objectives and strategies. The concept of corporate culture is one of the most overlooked management opportunities available for creating a work environment to help maximize employee productivity and job satisfaction.

To more clearly visualize the presence of corporate culture, consider two "culture extremes." Consider the best culture needed to make a newspaper newsroom effective and contrast that with the corporate culture needed to support the success of a high-powered Wall Street brokerage firm. Or consider the culture of a large regional bank and that of a west coast Internet and software design firm.

These cultures will be vastly different regarding dress code, work habits, the level of independent activity, the pace of action, the level of employee competitiveness, formality versus informality and more. Aside from skill requirements, hiring preferences will be widely different too. An individual who would thrive in one culture may falter in the other. Although vastly different, if properly managed, each culture can work for the benefit of the employees and the companies they work for.

In our fast-changing and increasingly competitive surveyor world, it is imperative for management to review the firm's culture objectively, so as to ensure that, for now and the near future, its attributes are fine tuned to adjust to market changes, meet client needs, serve as a competitive advantage, retain top talent in the firm, and provide continuing profits.

Corporate culture is a powerful management tool. Each surveyor—manager, at all levels of responsibility, needs to be a culture communicator to ensure the most productive work environment which supports the achievement of department- and firm-wide strategies and objectives.

Core culture behaviors start with senior management. Through their behavior and their communication of the values they most applaud in their firm's employees, management is

is telling employees, "this is the way we want to do things around here."

Every firm has a culture which demonstrates to employees, on a daily basis, what is most important within the firm... what matters most to top management. It is essentially a reflection of how the business operates. Is it entrepreneurial or bureaucratic? Do employees work well together or are they highly competitive? Do employees stay focused on firm issues or spend time in less productive ways? Are employees clear about the level of service they are empowered to provide to customers? Is there a focus on bringing people into the firm who can best support and strengthen the desired company culture?

Southwest Airlines is a good example of a culture that serves to differentiate the firm from its competition and also an example of how a culture can permeate an entire organization, even one with more than 30,000 employees. Business magazines as well as seminars related to company values, strategies, and culture often cite Southwest Airlines and its founder and Chairman Herb Kelleher for Southwest's accomplishments in these areas.

Southwest Airlines is known for its passion for customer service. As Mr. Kelleher stated, "Southwest Airlines thinks of itself as a customer service organization that happens to fly airplanes." Not surprisingly, the airline has become as well known for its culture as it has for its bottom-line results.

Its culture attracts top performers who in turn deliver consistent profitability. In fact, one way Southwest maintains its culture and its performance is through hiring. "We are zealous about hiring," says Southwest top managers. "We are looking for attitudes that are positive, and for people who lend themselves to causes. We want folks who have a good sense of humor and are interested in performing as a team, taking joy in team results instead of individual accomplishments."

For surveying firms, well managed culture can and should work to retain top employees, create productive work habits, and provide long-term positive client relationships. Let me use our firm

as an example. At R.A. Smith National (we have recently changed our name from R.A. Smith & Associates), we strive to maintain an exciting "career culture," a culture designed to empower people to be successful in our firm and want to stay with us throughout their entire career.

Our culture is managed so as to offer opportunity, provide for individuality, recognize performance, and provide incentives for professional development. Our culture is focused on mentoring, on the importance of innovation, passion for customer service, and it must welcome technological breakthroughs to improve performance, thus serving clients better and maximizing productivity.

We expect our managers to make this culture happen through such behaviors as:

1. **Mentoring employees.** Managers are expected to serve as mentors, providing leadership and advice that will help others be more successful. Managers need to be aware of the impact their mentoring can have on individuals as well as the firm. This is a vital characteristic of a career culture. Those with greater experience broaden the knowledge of others and by doing so demonstrate the interest our firm has in the development of every employee. We want to encourage our people to be always reaching for the next rung.
2. **Communicating each employee's importance.** Employees want to feel that they are part of the team. They want to be included in the communications process. They want to know that what they do counts.
3. **Broadening each employee's work experience and level of responsibility.** Productive employees need the opportunity to grow. Sometimes that need for growth or for work diversity or for increased responsibility may come at a time when it cannot be fully addressed. It is important then to identify opportunities which offer a compromise between the employee's expectations and the firm's ability to fulfil those expectations at that time.
4. **Encouraging and rewarding creativity, innovation, and new ideas.** Intellectual activity is the lifeblood

of any service organization, and the more a company enables its people to try new approaches, the more successful and forthcoming they will act.

5. **Exhibiting responsiveness to employee needs.** Managers need to communicate to employees, through their behavior, that questions, concerns or needs communicated to them will be received objective consideration. This does not mean that every question, concern or need can be answered or met to the satisfaction of the employee. But, at the very least, employees should be secure in the knowledge that their point of view will not be discounted nor will it cast an unfavorable light on them.
6. **Maintaining openness to communications and encouraging positive employee-initiated one-on-one communications.** Employees need to feel there is an openness at the firm, a willingness by their supervisors and upper management to listen to employees. Further, it is important to have the assurance that employee communications will be received as an earnest effort to further employee career and the welfare of the firm, not as complaining or dissatisfaction.
Establishing, maintaining, and constantly fine-tuning a company culture is the responsibility of top management. However, making that culture a permanent part of the company's fabric is the job of every manager without exception. Managers need to:
 1. Understand the impact culture has on company strategies and goals;
 2. Identify culture characteristics that best support the achievement of company goals and strategies and reflect the values of top management;
 3. Periodically analyze the company's culture attributes to determine how well it supports company vision and strategies and remove those that conflict with company needs;
 4. Strengthen or add certain new culture attributes; and,
 5. Ensure that culture attributes are consistently communicated to all employees through management behaviors at all

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The Cartography and Geographic Information Society (CaGIS) invites you to participate in the 17th international research symposium on computer-based cartography, AutoCarto 2008 (<http://www.cartogis.org/autocarto>). The symposium will be held at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, USA, from September 8-11. CaGIS invites cartographers, geographers, geospatial analysts, GIScientists, and others conducting research on the cutting edge of the geospatial sciences to submit papers and posters on a variety of topics, as well as websites demonstrating an innovative cartographic application or method. Presentations are scheduled for September 8-10, with workshops running on September 10 and 11. See <http://www.cartogis.org/autocarto> for further information on submissions, registration, and accommodation. See you in Shepherdstown in September!!

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levels. This should include such activities as employee communications, meeting presentations, recognition opportunities, casual conversations, story telling, award ceremonies, and thorough job performance reviews.

Think of your firm's culture as an energy force that shapes results. While defining corporate culture starts at the top of the firm, it is the responsibility of every manager to make corporate culture an integral part of the work environment. Every manager needs to be a culture communicator both in action and in word, working to create the most positive working environment possible.



ACSM at The Sheridan Press
—by Ilse Genovese

On a recent visit to the Sheridan Press, a Pennsylvania-based private company which prints over 800 academic journals and magazines [included our two journals and the *ACSM Bulletin*], I had a rare opportunity to meet the core Sheridan team who contribute to the excellent publications our member organizations publish. The Sheridan Press has been printing our publications since shortly after I joined ACSM in 1997. The people I worked with in those days have rotated to other responsibilities and new professionals have joined the team as our publications evolved. Our Account Manager is Deb Rausch [seated in the middle]. On her left is Kay Scheivert, EditExpress Specialist, who has coded the EditExpress formats for both *SaLIS* and *CaGIS*. Lisa Small [on the right], Editorial Services Team Leader, shepherds *SaLIS* from formatting to copy-editing, to composition, allowing me to concentrate on substantive editing. Standing on my left is Matt Baile, Full Service CSR, who manages the institutional subscription databases of all three of our publications. On my left is Todd Ware, Digital Services Architect, who is our contact point for all issues concerning EditExpress implementation. And last but definitely not the least, is Diane Moul, Digital Services Specialist, who has guided me, with advice and in-person training, through many sticky digital publishing issues. From myself, and on behalf of all members within ACSM and our subscribers, THANK YOU!

