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## Primed to Thrive

*Katie Elzer-Peters*

Unemployment in the United States hovered around 4% in late 2018. That's practically as low as it goes and means employees are all but guaranteed to find a better offer elsewhere if they look. To remain competitive, employers have to create a culture that attracts excellent employees and then, once they're there, retains them—the excellent employees, not the mediocre ones.

You have to have an excellent company culture—to be a place where people want to work and shop. You need a culture of, “If better is possible than good isn't enough,” according to John Kennedy, a frequent speaker at Cultivate and business development consultant in the green industry and hospitality/tourism industry (with success stories including Marriott Hotels, Baltimore Ravens, Exxon Mobile, Walters Gardens, AmericanHort and more).

John says that garden centers deliver wants-based purchases and experiences, compared to needs-based, and “with wants-based spending, consumers have choices.” If customers don't like what they see they'll go elsewhere, and what your customers see and experience is largely created by your employees. Whether employees are happy, feel appreciated and look forward to being at work or are untrained, unmotivated and surly will have a huge impact on your customer happiness and, thus, your bottom line.

It's not enough to say, “We're excellent.” Retailers have to practice it. Here's what an excellent culture that attracts stellar employees looks like.

### Find Out What You Don't Know

A lot of business owners think their place of employment is a great place to work, when it actually isn't. An owner's idea of “fast paced and ever-changing so nothing is boring,” could appear to employees as “frantic, confusing and unstable.”

John says to complete surveys with employees and report back your findings, in addition to looking at strategic plans and financials.

“We call it change by design. Don't wait for it to hurt,” he says. “There are plenty of people happy to live in ignorance because they're afraid they won't like the answers.” But by doing surveys and investigating the health of the organization, you can identify problems and potential challenges before they derail the entire operation.

Once you know what you're working with internally, you can take care of the next step.

### Deliver on the Big Five

According to his website, [www.johnkennedyconsulting.com](http://www.johnkennedyconsulting.com), the top five things employees look for in a job have remained relatively constant over the past 50 years. Economic conditions can reorder them, but these are always

the top five:

- To be appreciated for the work that they do
- Have a say in the big picture; to have a voice
- Job security
- Good wages
- Flexibility of schedule in regard to their personal lives (for example, leaving early to catch a child's recital without it being the end of the world)

Consider these the bare minimum of a functional cultural foundation.

## **Post and Enforce Code of Conduct Policies**

Next, come the code of conduct and sexual harassment policies. It's a topic most people want to tiptoe around, and that song and dance is hurting business. Leslie Halleck of Halleck Horticultural says, "It is really important for owners to set the tone and create the policy outlining what will not be tolerated, what is inappropriate, how to report things in a formal way, and what the processes and procedures are when a report is made."

She says that by not having the policies in place, business owners are signaling that these issues aren't a priority. That's not going to inspire confidence in a large part of the workforce.

"It benefits business owners to have sexual harassment policies because, by doing so, potentially up to 50% of their existing and future employees will feel safe and empowered to do their jobs," she said. "If women are afraid to speak up about those issues, what else are they not speaking up about. When someone feels undervalued or oppressed, how invested do you think they are to the success of the business?"

For a thriving business, owners must confront this issue.

## **Reinforce Company Values at All Levels**

Terry Delaney, a green industry business consultant at Know Trust Love, says a key to a successful company culture is "having an engaged leadership that is very accessible."

"I don't care how big the company is; there must be leaders who are talking to everyone," he says. "If you get a whole truckload of plants in, the leaders need to be there to help unload with everyone else."

In an era of low unemployment, one way to learn if a business has a culture conducive to attracting and retaining good employees is to watch their staff at work and monitor their turnover. High turnover can be a key indicator the culture isn't as strong as the owner may have thought.

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## **A Case Study in Culture**

In Wilmington, North Carolina, I frequent a restaurant named Spoonfed, owned by Kim and Matt Lennert. Since their opening in early 2017, I've been greeted by the same employees day in and day out—remarkable as the restaurant industry tends to have similar long days, low-ish pay and hard work as the green industry business. I talked to Kim and Matt about how they've created a cafe that nobody wants to leave and then spoke to key members of their staff to hear the employees' side.

"From the time I started working in the industry I knew that if I had my own place, I didn't want to run it in the typical top-down, tyrannical way that most restaurants operate," Matt says.

They have gone a different direction, using the five core emotional skills described by renowned Chef Danny Meyer (Of Gramercy Tavern and Union Square cafe fame) in his book, "Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business." The five skills are:

- Optimistic warmth (genuine kindness, thoughtfulness and a sense that the glass is always half full)
- Intelligence (not just "smarts," but rather an insatiable curiosity to learn for the sake of learning)
- Work ethic (a natural tendency to do something as well as it can be done)
- Empathy (an awareness of care for, and connection to, how others feel and how your actions make others feel)
- Self-awareness and integrity (an understanding of what makes you tick and a natural inclination to be accountable for doing the right thing with honesty and superb judgement)

Matt says, "You can teach people the emotional skills they need if you give them access to the vocabulary. You have to bring all of your values that you consider important to the table and you have to live your values. If your staff doesn't see you living your values, working hard and doing what you ask of them, forget it."

He says that they post their company values and the emotional skills that guide their work in the kitchen, and bring them up during stand-up meetings. They're constantly reinforcing the skills they want their staff to bring to work and it shows in their reviews, their steady clientele and their staff's outlook. Here are the five core values posted in the kitchen:

- Spoonfed Kitchen will create and nurture a community of employees, artisans, farmers, vendors and customers that love great food and the art of entertaining.
- We will strive to live by the "5 Core Emotional Skills" and cultivate our "Excellence Reflex" as a team that will inspire others.
- Spoonfed will be a place of collaboration and mentoring. We will hire employees and artisans that will contribute a unique and positive voice, and help guide them in personal and professional growth.
- Spoonfed will be able to take financial care of the team that gives it life.
- Our decisions and actions will be guided by love, not fear.

Assistant Manager Caitlin Mott said she knew from the beginning the Lennerts live their values, particularly: "Our decisions will be guided by love, not fear."



"They told me I could bring my daughter to the interview," she says. "As soon as they got their generator going after the hurricane [Florence], they came in and started making food for the community."

Caroline Chamblis, the General Manager, says, "They have empowered all of the staff to have ownership in their work. I was picking chicken with one of the cooks the other day and he said, 'Nobody's going to get a chicken bone on my watch.' It's a small thing, but really huge in the way the entire business works."

Kim says that establishing a culture doesn't mean

"sameness."

“We don’t all have to agree on everything,” she says. “Establishing a company culture gives us all a way to meet in the middle and work together.”

In this economy, that’s the only way to not only survive, but to thrive. **GP**

*Pictured: General Manager Caroline Chamblis helps a customer at the counter of Spoonfed’s open kitchen. The open concept kitchen allows staff to get to know the customers and the customers to get a peek behind the scenes. Owners Kim and Matt say this helps foster community within the restaurant.*