



Using a 'Startup Mentality' to Keep Employees Engaged

Peer-recognition programs and “responsive connectivity” can help organizations grow.

By Andrew R. McIlvaine

When Al Chiaradonna was tasked with launching a new business unit within his company, SEI Investments Co., he decided the best way to help the new entity succeed would be to infuse it with “responsive connectivity.”

“I saw an opportunity to build a vision from the ground up that would be employee-led,” says Chiaradonna, senior vice president for SEI, a financial-services company based in the Philadelphia suburbs.

He wanted the new business unit, which builds technology platforms for private banks and wealth managers, to be responsive, nimble and unencumbered by policies and procedures – to be like “a start-up within a company of 3,000 employees.”

In building this culture, Chiaradonna has emphasized four components, which he says have been critical in helping employees unleash innovation within the larger organization: a “volunteer board,” an employee-led “Higher Gear Award,” stay interviews and a workplace-design revamp.

The volunteer board – essentially, a blackboard for listing volunteer projects within and outside the company – was conceived as a way to foster “responsive connectivity” within the organization, says Chiaradonna, or a way to better engage employees with the company and the larger world outside it.

“We decided on four projects, things we’d always talk about but never got around to doing, and listed them on the board,” he says. “Within five minutes, there were probably 25 employees surrounding the board and all the projects had been taken.”

Since then, other divisions within SEI have created their own volunteer boards, he says.

One of those projects was designing a peer-led employee recognition award in which there would be only one winner – no second, third, fourth place or “honorable mentions,” says Chiaradonna.

“There was a lot of initial pushback when I said there was to be only one winner,” he says.

The end result was the Higher Gear Award, in which nominees are interviewed, along with their colleagues and even their spouses. On awards day, every nominee’s story is shared with employees and, even though only one winner (selected by employees) is recognized, all the stories are celebrated online and on “chalk walls” (see photo above) in the company’s office.

“It lets the recognition live on in a meaningful way,” says Chiaradonna.

As the business unit grew, concern arose that its unique culture would be diluted. SEI’s HR staffers suggested to Chiaradonna that stay interviews would help preserve it.

“I don’t believe in exit interviews, because no one says what’s really on their minds because they don’t want to

burn bridges,” he says. “With stay interviews, you get to ask people what they love about the company, what keeps them here and what we could do better.”

Chiaradonna and his team analyzed everything that was said in the stay interviews (which were conducted by staffers from outside the business unit so employees would feel freer to be open). From the stay interviews, Chiaradonna learned that employees wanted other opportunities to connect with one another besides through their jobs. In response, he helped launch an internal book club that employees share and discuss their favorite books with one another.

“There’ve been some amazing discussions that have come out of this,” he says.

Employees also wanted a more digital, mobile workspace that fostered collaboration, so they helped redesign the business unit’s space to an open-office concept, with no walls or cubicles and lots of natural light.

Not everyone’s happy with the new arrangement, Chiaradonna admits.

“We do ‘hoteling’ now, and there was some resistance to that, particularly from our salespeople – who are on the road the most,” he says. “I told them ‘Guys, don’t you sell change for a living?’ My point was, the world’s changing, and we may not have it right yet but let’s at least embrace it and try to make it work.”

One of the biggest initial resisters to hoteling is now one of its biggest advocates, says Chiaradonna.