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Not the Usual Call Center

In interviewing successful business leaders, we try to learn from patterns. Perhaps the most consistent theme has been the emulation of corporate culture legends such as Southwest Airlines and the Container Store.

For a lesson in corporate charisma, we turned to Paul Spiegelman, co-founder and chief executive of Bedford-based Beryl Cos. His call center company has been named one of the best small to medium-size companies to work for in America.

Beryl is an outsourcing call center for 450 hospitals around the country, and the company does not telemarket or up-sell. Instead, Beryl's call advisers provide information and referral services.

Here's how it works: Beryl's hospital clients advertise their services through various media. Calls and e-mails responding to those ads go to Beryl rather than the hospital directly.

The call advisers have computer data at their fingertips describing every service the hospital offers.

Beryl also provides nurse triage for undemanding ailments, appointment scheduling, follow-up letters regarding suggested hospital services and post-discharge quality assurance calls.

Beryl is the market leader in its segment even though it charges more than its competitors. Its employees are paid no more than market rates, at least if cash compensation is the sole measuring stick. Yet Beryl boasts a turnover rate that is about one-fifth the industry average. For a relatively small company -- 300 employees and \$30 million in revenue -- in an industry characterized by low morale, high turnover and poor service, Beryl has earned lots of recognition.

Circle of growth

Mr. Spiegelman's philosophy is simple: "Invest in people first and gain their loyalty. That will drive customers, which will drive revenues, which are invested back in our people."

Many companies put investors first, or at least customers. Mr. Spiegelman thinks this is backward, having seen too many instances where investors prevented management from investing in employees. The company ends up with a lackluster workforce that can't compete for business on any basis other than cellar pricing.

"Employee satisfaction is our first priority, even over customer satisfaction," he said.

Hiring the heart

Mr. Spiegelman invests heavily in recruiting and hiring. The process is long and leads to hiring a slender 5 percent of applicants. To assess a recruit's fit, the prospect is taken out to meals and has multiple interviews with potential peers, human resources staff, team leaders and trainers.

Mr. Spiegelman wants people who are compassionate and instinctively nice -- qualities that can't be trained. Once hired, the employee goes through five weeks of training and extensive testing. Not everyone graduates.

The huge call center is painted in pleasing colors and has calming light. Low-walled cubicles promote co-worker interaction. "Pink noise" technology in the ceiling reduces noise volume.

Human resources is formally named the Department of Great People and Fun. Seriously. The receptionist is the director of first impressions. Beryl hosts let-your-hair-down events such as a Gong Show, Family Day, Pajama Day and Movie Night. A monthly family newsletter is sent to co-workers' homes with stories for kids, puzzles and pictures to color.

On the more serious side, annual town hall meetings answer any question. Lunches with 12 to 15 co-workers at a time provide Mr. Spiegelman with personal, quick contact. He walks the floor several times a week to chat with call advisers and ask how they're doing.

"As a leader, I must be very visible and accessible, breaking down walls of communication," he said.

Mr. Spiegelman works hard to keep Beryl from losing its mojo.

He once engaged a SWAT team of

MBA students to determine whether communication arteries between management and employees had become blocked. He writes personal notes every day (50 on average each month) about company anniversaries and events in co-workers' lives. He sometimes writes notes to employees' spouses as well.

Beryl has provided emergency financial assistance, bought school clothes and even paid rent.

One day, when workers were feeling pressure from being understaffed, Mr. Spiegelman bought everyone iPods. He believes that caring "has to be systematic." If it's up and down, it's down.

Low fees, low service

Beryl's competitors emphasize their lower fees. This sales technique ignores two fundamental customer considerations: the provider's quantifiable results and trust that the provider will keep the customer's interests paramount. Mr. Spiegelman set out to prove market superiority in both categories.

Beryl analyzes tons of data about the calls its clients receive and, just as importantly, the calls they don't. Beryl can tell its clients how callers learned about the hospital, the most popular specialties and requested services that the hospital didn't offer.

Beryl also provides market intelligence.

National speakers are invited to speak to hospitals during an annual three-day conference. The focus is on clients and their concerns rather than Beryl.

A National Benchmarking Study compiling caller data allows Beryl clients to compare their caller demographics and marketing campaign results with hospitals nationwide.

Beryl attained its success through a virtuous circle: invest foremost in people, which drives revenue. Repeat systematically.

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