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## “Lead Your Own Way”

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In our challenging economy, it may be tempting for companies to “go with the flow” and follow common business practices. However, Paul Spiegelman, CEO and co-founder of Beryl, urges companies to do what’s right for them, and go against the grain when needed. In the attached article, Paul shares ten common business practices that he has chosen to ignore, which have led to greater employee satisfaction and retention at Beryl.

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To read Paul’s monthly column on Inc.com, visit [www.inc.com/author/paul-spiegelman](http://www.inc.com/author/paul-spiegelman)

To learn more about Beryl, visit [www.beryl.net](http://www.beryl.net).





# Lead Your Own Way

Ten pieces of management conventional wisdom you should ignore, especially in a weak economy

By Paul Spiegelman

With **uncertainty** in the market, many business leaders are focused on “playing it safe.” By following conventional practices, they may be taking a far more dangerous route. While it is important to rely on best practices, some may be short-sighted and hold your business back from achieving its true potential.

As CEO of Beryl, a company that manages patient interactions for hospitals, we have a unique culture that has resulted in extremely low turnover and engaged employees who deliver exceptional customer service, resulting in loyal customers who allow us to continue to grow our business. We’ve challenged conventional wisdom to protect our culture at all costs. As a five-time Inc. 5000 company that continues to meet our business goals, we have no regrets.

To that end, over the past few tough economic years, we’ve chosen to ignore these 10 common practices:

**1. Outside capital is necessary.** In January 2010, I signed a letter of intent to sell a majority interest in the company to a private equity firm. In the end, I walked away from the deal because I realized that bringing in a financial partner with a short-term view of financial performance could have a negative impact on culture, which has been a key ingredient in our success.

**2. Never fire a client.** A very large customer put our employees in the position of violating their core values. This customer charged clientele for something they didn’t buy, and when it received complaints, wanted Beryl to try to talk them into keeping the product—a prospect we felt would compromise our integrity. As a result, our employees voted to fire the customer. While the loss of income had a short-term financial impact, we realized that ignoring our core values was a slippery slope that could significantly impact our business in the

long term. Core values are the one thing in our business that never changes. If we go outside those lines, we can lose the trust of our employees and our customers.

**3. Keep talented employees, even if they aren’t a culture fit.** At Beryl, we had an operational leader with a great resume and tremendous experience. However, the employee was not able to gain the trust and buy-in of other employees. Great ideas will only take you so far. Ultimately, we fired that employee because her leadership style was not a fit for our organization.

**4. Don’t hire during a recession.** If there is one positive for employers during a recession, it is the availability of great talent. We have hired more than 100 net new employees since 2008, many of them senior leaders with extraordinary experience that have helped take our company to the next level.

**5. Avoid spending money on “fun.”** When times are tight, it seems difficult to justify spending money on things like a holiday party. However, these activities foster employee engagement, and help reduce employee turnover.

**6. Scale back on training and education.** Spending on training and education directly benefits both employees and employers. Employees enhance their skill set and feel good about the company’s investment in them, and businesses benefit from more productive and engaged employees.

**7. Keep benefits to a minimum.** When businesses started experiencing pain at the start of the recession, many reduced employee benefits such as their 401K match. At Beryl, we doubled our 401K match to show employees that we were committed to them in the long-term. Actions like this have helped us maintain low turnover.

**8. Grow by acquisition.** Certainly there are more stories about failed mergers and acquisitions than successful ones. It is even more challenging when culture is important. During a recession, it may be tempting to acquire a struggling company with promise. However, it is rare to find another company that shares your value set. While it is possible to infuse your culture within the new organization, it creates a significant distraction and risk, since it isn’t always possible. Instead, we’ve focused on organic growth.

**9. Stay focused on your product or service.** People buy relationships—not just your product or service. You can enhance the relationship by elevating the conversation to a topic that is important to you and your customers. At Beryl, we also have The Beryl Institute, which engages healthcare leaders in the broader discussion about patient experience. Ultimately, we all have a product or service to sell, but it’s listening to and talking with customers and potential customers that helps get us (or even keep us) in the door.

**10. Put customers first.** It seems counterintuitive, but employees should take priority over your customers. When employees have a high level of job satisfaction, it translates to excellent customer experiences, which results in growth. This isn’t to suggest that you should ignore customers, but rather that your customers will benefit more when you focus on your employees.

In a recession, it is especially tempting to try different approaches, even if they challenge your core values. No one knows your business better than you. Resist the urge to be a lemming. Know the trends. Watch the trends. But charter your own course.