

Bank Finds Way to Keep Morale High Even in Tough Times

By Jessica Harper | Wednesday, June 9, 2010

In times of pay freezes and budget cuts, employers often struggle with morale.

However, one local bank has found a way to boost employee satisfaction despite the hard times.

Citizens Bank Minnesota, which has a branch in Lakeville, has managed to create a fun yet professional work environment through various policies and team-building exercises.

And it's paid off, said Jean Geistfeld, marketing director for Citizens Bank. "When employees are happy, customers are happy," Geistfeld said. "Focusing on the people who work for you is the most important thing."

The policies Citizens Bank adopted in 2002 focus on positive feedback, team building and community activism.

"Our goal is to create a family here," Geistfeld said.

Supervisors make a point to celebrate successes with recognition and occasional high fives.

A Focus Committee was formed to develop fun events and activities for employees to participate in such as chocolate chip cookie day and bubble day. The committee also adopted "Red-shirt Fridays" in which employees wear red shirts with yellow ribbons on the sleeves to show their support for U.S. troops fighting overseas.

In addition to wearing supportive shirts, employees adopted 18 soldiers to whom they send care packages every month.

"We've gotten lots of letters of thanks from them," Geistfeld said.

Employees also support local high school sports teams by wearing team colors during homecoming and attending games.

While the bank encourages positive attitudes, it has put the kibosh on negativity.

Two major policies are no whining and no gossiping.

If someone is dissatisfied with someone or something, he or she is encouraged to address it head-on rather than whine or gossip, Geistfeld said.

The bank also recently began requiring employees to read "Thank God it's Monday," by Roxanne Emmerich, a Minneapolis-based consultant who helped the bank develop its new culture.

Each week, employees read a new chapter of the book, and present and discuss what they learned.

Joe Gisch, vice president and branch manager of Citizens Bank in Lakeville, said he enjoys the discussion created by the book.

Gisch describes the bank's policies and techniques as a "progressive way to do things without a lot of cost."

"It's a great way to get people energized," he said.

Gisch, who has worked for the bank only seven months, said he likes that Citizens Bank has a warm atmosphere.

Gisch said he also appreciates that the company has a mentor program as a part of its emphasis on employee satisfaction, which has helped him quickly learn the ins and outs of the company.

"The program really enables us to dove-tail the knowledge of the entire Citizens Bank system," he said.

In addition to boosting morale, the changes have increased productivity over the last eight years, Geistfeld said.

"It's a myth that if people are having fun, they are goofing off," Geistfeld said. "If people enjoy their job, they won't be sitting at their desk wondering when they can go home."

Pamela Stoltenberg, a personal banker and assistant branch manager at Citizens Bank in Lakeville, agreed.

She said the bank's work environment makes her feel motivated, which she said improves customer service.

"It makes coming to work fun, which rubs off on customers and other employees," she said.

Having a workplace where employees feel recognized, involved in their community, and safe from gossip and negativity makes for a rewarding environment, Stoltenberg said.

"It's nice when everyone works together and gets along," she said.