



Ames Company Uses Volunteerism to Build Good Culture

A small tech company in Central Iowa has found a way to create a positive workplace culture that not only retains the best employees, it benefits the entire community. It's done through volunteerism and is a concept that starts with the top management.

Leading by example is one way Cliff Smith, CEO of GlobalVetLINK (GVL) of Ames, creates the type of workplace culture which helps his company keep employees happy. Smith, recognized in September with the Iowa Governor's Volunteer

Award, knows happy employees are engaged employees, and engaged employees are essential to the success of GVL.

Smith was nominated for the Governor's Volunteer Award for his work with the Main Street Cultural District. He has dedicated over 100 hours a year, for the past three years, serving the nationally-accredited program dedicated to economic development, historic preservation, and beautification of downtown Ames.

"Cliff has demonstrated significant leadership for the local program and downtown revitalization effort," said Michael Wagler, Main Street Iowa State Coordinator. "I specifically thought of Cliff for the award for his leadership and personal and professional investment of his time, talents, and resources."

For fifteen years Smith has donated his skills and experiences to help others start and grow their own business. But it isn't about money, it's about the impact a new business can have on a community.

"It is about creating opportunities for people to impact the lives of others either economically through job creation, or socially through a new experience," Smith said.

By helping create a better community, Smith feels he helps create a better place for his employees to live, work, and play.

In 2014, GVL established a "Cultural Committee" consisting of employees wanting to help improve the moral and culture of GVL. Initially, this group's focus was on organizing team-building events and social events like bowling and a day at a minor league baseball game. But it wasn't long before the committee proposed that employees be organized in to teams that would spend half to a full work day volunteering outside the office, at local charities. It was an idea quickly embraced by the management.

"We discovered that we had an affinity to want to help and that doing this together enabled us to form bonds we weren't able to form at the bowling alley or in the office working together," said Smith. "Today the employees encourage each other to get involved in a number of ways."



The time spent volunteering can be in large or small blocks of time, but the teams are encouraged to do the volunteer activity together. Volunteer activities ranged from Habitat for Humanity and toy drives to making blankets at the office to donate to Blank Children's Hospital.

“It just seems that the kind of people who choose to work at GVL have a desire to help,” said Smith. “This desire is engrained in our culture and core values.”

Research confirms what GVL has seen first-hand: A work atmosphere with good culture and employee “happiness,” is linked to an increase in employee engagement and retention, and as a result, an increase in profits.

“Happy employees tend to be better performers and have higher productivity than less happy employees,” said Dr. Melissa Chamberlin, Assistant Professor of Management, Iowa State University. “They are more likely to engage in creative thinking and apply broader range of ideas or solutions to issues that arise in the workplace.”

Dr. Chamberlin also says happy employees help companies they work for stay novel, relevant and adaptive within their respective industries. A 2017 Gallup Poll, *State of the American Workplace*, backs this up, finding happy workers are absent from work 41 percent less and are 17 percent more productive. The survey showed businesses that did the best job of engaging employees and keeping them happy had 21 percent greater profitability and 20 percent higher sales.

The Gallup Poll also shows businesses that operate like GVL have an easier time keeping employees, with 59 percent less turnover.

“Employee engagement makes it less likely that employees will quit their jobs, reducing the costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training new employees,” Dr. Chamberlin said.

And while 51 percent of American companies have this problem, it is almost non-existent for GVL. The company has very little turnover, which Smith attributes, in part, to the company's “people” philosophy. His employees agree.

“GVL is very involved in the well-being of their employees, and always do right by people,” said Christian Hempen, GVL employee. “Personal development goals are of the utmost importance, and achievement of those goals is celebrated. GVL gives you all the tools that you need to be successful.”

Other employees use words like “collaborative” and “passionate” to describe the culture at GVL. They work hard, they have fun, and the result has spilled over into the community of Ames

through the volunteerism of GVL employees. Some promote events like a blood drive and ask for volunteers, some get involved with programs like Leadership Ames or Main Street Cultural District, while others create teams to participate in charitable events like Race for the Cure. GVL also allows employees to use its meeting facilities to host leadership, planning, and committee meetings for community, religious and charitable causes.

“It is all about the people,” Smith said. “We provide people an opportunity to do what they love and love what they do.”