

*“...I wished
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LASZLO BOCK

Passion, not Perks

Nurturing the people in your organization doesn't require expensive perks or touchy-feely gimmicks. It's about motivating, engaging, and listening – and it can work for anybody. Laszlo Bock, Google's SVP of People Operations, explains how.

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A friend from a Fortune 500 company called me recently. "Our CEO wants us to be more innovative," she said. "He asked me to call you because Google is known for having an innovative culture. One of his ideas is to set up a 'creativity room' where we have a foosball table, beanbags, lava lamps, and lots of snacks so people can come up with crazy ideas. What do you think? How does Google do it?"

My friend and her CEO were clearly familiar with the Google perks that get all the press: The free cafes, the funky offices, and the games. What they weren't familiar with are the three components of our culture that really make our company different. Moreover,

my personal belief is that these three components are relevant and applicable to almost any organization, because they describe the conditions necessary (although not sufficient) to foster creative, committed, and innovative teams.

Mission

We spend more time working than we do on almost any other activity in our lives. People want all that time to mean something. Other companies make similar products, and yet our employees tell us that they are drawn to Google because being here means something more than 'just' searching the internet or linking friends. ➡

Mission statements are easy to write, but difficult to realize. Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. That's nice rhetoric, but how do you make it mean something? Because our mission is a bottom-up encapsulation of what excites Googlers, it creates an arena where data and people can be brought together in surprising ways, ranging from Speak2Tweet (the voicemail-to-Twitter application launched during the Egyptian revolution) to a father sending his daughter a twenty-first-century message in a bottle (as seen in our 'Dear Sophie' campaign for Chrome – check it out on YouTube).

The translation of our mission into something real and tangible has a huge effect on who decides to join Google, how much engagement and creativity they bring to this place, and even on how they feel and behave after leaving.

Transparency

'Default to open' is a phrase sometimes heard in the open-source community. Chris Grams from Red Hat defined defaulting to open as "...rather than starting from a point where you choose *what to share*, start[ing] from a point where you choose *what not to share*." Google didn't create this concept, but it's safe to say we ran with it.

We share everything we can. We have a weekly all-hands meeting called TGIF, hosted by our founders, Larry and Sergey. In the first 30 minutes, we review news and product launches from the past week, demo upcoming products, and celebrate wins. But the second 30 minutes is the part that matters most: Q&A.

Everything is up for question and

debate, from the trivial ("Larry, now that you're CEO will you start wearing a suit?") The answer was a definite 'no'), to the ethical ("Is Google going in the right direction?"). A few weeks into every quarter, our Executive Chairman, Eric Schmidt, presents to all Googlers virtually the exact materials that were presented to our Board of Directors at their last meeting. Our intranet includes product roadmaps, launch plans, and employee snippets (weekly status reports), alongside employee and team OKRs (quarterly goals) so that everyone can see what everyone else is working on. We share everything, and trust Googlers to keep the information confidential.

And if you think about it, if you're an organization that says 'our people are our greatest asset,' you *must* default to open. It's the only way to demonstrate to your employees that you believe they are trustworthy adults and have good judgment. And giving them more context about what is happening (and how, and why) will enable them to do their jobs more effectively and contribute in ways a top-down manager couldn't anticipate.

Voice

Believing in a greater good and knowing what's going on are important, but people then need to be able to translate their beliefs and knowledge into action. We try to have as many channels for expression as we can, recognizing that different people – and different ideas – will percolate up in different ways. The channels include direct emails to any of our leaders; TGIF; various sites and listservs; Google+ conversations (of course); the Google Universal Ticketing Systems ('GUTS' – which is a way to file issues

about anything, and is then reviewed for patterns or problems, similar to New York City's 311 line); 'FixIts' (24-hour sprints where we drop everything and focus 100 percent of our energy on solving a specific problem); and a wide range of surveys.

But just as important as generating input is doing something with it. We regularly survey employees about their managers, and then use that information to publicly recognize the best managers and enlist them as teachers and role models for the next year. The worst managers receive intense coaching and support, which helps 75 percent of them get better within a quarter.

Our largest survey, 'Googlegeist,' solicits feedback on hundreds of issues and then enlists volunteer employee teams across the entire company to solve the biggest problems. A new engineering-to-product management rotation program, and the across-the-board salary increases we provided at the beginning of the year, are just two recent examples of programs that have come out of Googlegeist.

Some people will argue that giving employees so much information and such a loud voice leads to anarchy, or to a situation where, since everyone's opinion is valued, unanimity is impossible, as anyone can object and derail an effort; an environment where 10,000 people can say 'no' but no one can say 'yes.' The reality is that every issue needs a decision maker. Managed properly, the result of these approaches is not some transcendent moment of unanimity. Rather, it is a robust, data-driven discussion that brings the best ideas to light, so that when a decision is made it leaves the dissenters with enough context to understand and respect the rationale for the decision, even if they disagree with the outcome. ➡

I was at a dinner of Chief HR Officers once and one told me, “Well of course Google can do this. You guys have great margins. I’m in a business with low single-digit margins. I can’t afford cafes or TGIFs or any of the things you do.” He was right that he couldn’t afford the cafes, but the cafes don’t actually have anything to do with it. Before I could reply, another person jumped in and said, “What are you talking about? Most of what makes Google’s culture work is free.” She was right. The bulk of what we do to cultivate this creative, passionate workforce costs nothing. Making our mission tangible is a natural outcome of who we are. Defaulting to open and giving Googlers a voice is a natural consequence of acting in accordance with what we believe about people.

And personally, I believe this is an insight about the human condition. People look for meaning in their work. People want to know what’s happening in their environment. People want to have some ability to shape that environment. Mission. Transparency. Voice. These three components of our culture create a virtuous cycle of attraction, community, engagement, and innovation.

With all this in mind, I turned back to my friend on the phone. I told her a bit about how Google thinks about these issues, and suggested that perhaps their CEO could try videotaping his staff meetings and sharing the recordings with people so they can see what’s going on in the company and what’s important to their leaders. “No,” she replied, “we’d never do that.”

How about having junior people attend leadership team meetings as note-takers, and they could then be vectors for that knowledge across the company? “No, we couldn’t share that information with junior people.”

Hmm... Okay. What about when the CEO does employee meetings, seeding the audience with the tough, provocative questions that people are afraid to ask. No? A different angle is to have a suggestion box – which each quarter let a self-nominated group of employees decide what suggestions to implement. And maybe even giving them a budget to do so? “Oh no, that won’t work. Who knows what they might do?”

At which point I wished her luck with the beanbags and lava lamps 🍷

