

Forward focus preceded pandemic

MARY TERESA BITTI
Postmedia Content Works

Even before the pandemic hit and changed how we live and work, Canada's leading companies were thinking differently about how to drive performance and build sustainable companies. The COVID-19 pandemic became a rallying cry, accelerating three key themes that are on display in this year's winning Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures. Specifically, these companies are: actively working on culture, developing an environment of psychological safety, and focusing on individual and team development.

"More than ever before, companies are looking inward. The pandemic has given us pause to really understand our most valuable asset is our people," says Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone Human Capital and the founder of Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Awards. Launched in 2005, the program turns the spotlight on organizations that have built high-performing cultures. It is also a harbinger of best practices to come.

"Culture is the one thing that cannot be duplicated. It is a competitive advantage, and that understanding has hit the mainstream whether you're a \$4 million or \$4 billion company," says Parker.

Here's how this year's winners are building, sustaining and transforming culture by focusing on their people.

Driving high performance culture transformation

Det'on Cho Management LP, one of this year's growth category winners and the first winner from any of the three territories, is an Indigenous development corporation and the economic arm for Yellowknife Dene First Nations. "We're a for-profit entity with a social license. That is baked into our DNA," says president and CEO Paul Gruner.

Det'on Cho Management started on a path to prioritize and transform culture four years ago with a specific goal: to be the Indigenous partner and employer of choice. "The NWT has the lowest unemployment rate in the country. We have to be able to develop, train and empower our own people so we can deliver on our social mission to create jobs and build capacity in the region," says Gruner. "Your people define you as an organization and will ultimately write your success."

To that end, the organization created comprehensive training and leadership development programs, and also implemented quarterly surveys of its 800 employees to ensure people were moving up into higher-level positions.



Marty Parker, president and CEO, Waterstone Human Capital. SUPPLIED

In short order, Det'on Cho Management became the first unsettled First Nation to become a limited partnership; the first Indigenous group to mine on its own land; made an acquisition and built the largest Indigenous-owned logistics company in Canada; and significantly improved profitability. Recently the Indigenomics Institute selected Det'on Cho Management as one of the top 10 companies to watch.

Removing barriers to the future of work and learning

Midmarket category winner global learning technology leader D2L has a clear mission: to transform the way the world learns. "We can only do that if we build a great culture that helps bring out the best in our people," says John Baker, D2L's founder, president and CEO.

Baker made culture a priority from the day he founded D2L as a university student in 1999. "We're learn-it-alls, not know-it-alls. We're going to learn and grow together." To that end, D2L has training and professional development programs to help people both be the best in their craft, and to develop as leaders getting the best out of others. "You don't have to choose one or the other," says Baker. This year D2L launched an annual program where everyone has access to \$2,500 to upskill for the future.

The company also runs two annual hackathons to stretch teams. One is focused on improving D2L and its technology and products; the other is focused on solving a big challenge by developing new skills and building something new.

The impact of culture: D2L has 900 people, customers in 40 countries and 15 million people use its platform. It grew through the dot-com crash of 2000 and the finan-

cial crisis of 2008/09. During the pandemic, it leaned into its learn-it-all mindset and was one of the first groups to launch a free open course for its clients on the science of COVID-19 and how to navigate it. Baker joined Canada's Industry Strategy Council to help with the economic recovery. Through this time, some 200 people within D2L were promoted or transferred and the company is looking to hire another 100 to 200 people. It also won the Candidate Experience award, beating out the likes of Google and Amazon.

Unlocking the power of passion for compassion

The Ottawa Hospital (TOH) is one of Canada's leading academic health science centres and one of this year's Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures broader public sector winners. "Culture for us is the most important thing we've worked on over the last decade," says president and CEO Cameron Love.

The focus on culture took on an added urgency in 2010. To that point, the focus had been on completing the merger of the four organizations that came together in 1998 to form TOH. "We were a world-class organization in terms of technical proficiency, but the culture was not where we wanted it to be," says Love. "Our patient outcomes were great, but not the experience."

To improve patient experience, the organization built its culture on a clear set of values: respect, teamwork, compassion and commitment to quality. "Part of the reason we've been successful is this unwavering commitment to upholding those values. Technically, we are one of the best hospitals in Canada. The culture piece is what makes us stand out."

Today, leadership potential and performance evaluations are assessed from a values

perspective and the ability to bring out the best in others. This is true both for administrative leaders and medical leaders.

That alignment has allowed the hospital to achieve its goal of patient-centred care. "The piece that differentiates a patient experience is how compassionate, how nice we were. Were we present with them? Did we answer all their questions, make them feel safe and comfortable?" says Love.

Patient experience results have improved dramatically with the majority of patients citing their experience as either very good or excellent.

Building trust to empower employees

Loopio, a software provider that helps companies streamline their response process for RFPs, is one of the first winners of the Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Emerging Award. It is also one of Canada's fastest-growing technology companies, ranking 27 on the Deloitte Technology Fast 50.

Co-founder and CEO Zak Hemraj credits the company's culture, which empowers Loopers to make an impact and to make decisions, with its success and resilience. "Our mission is to harness collective brain power to fuel growth both for our customers and each of our team members. High-growth people drive high-growth companies forward. High-growth companies for high-growth people." To that end, the company puts its five core values — curiosity, candour, grit, mastery and support — to work in its interview process, performance management, recognition, and stress-testing new ideas.

In the last three years, there have been 100 promotions and career pivots within Loopio. "That's how we've

done it.

Leadership training is focused on ingraining and enhancing the behaviours that drive Scotiabank's culture. "We have 90,000 plus employees, it can't be just the CEO who sets the tone for the organization," says Mason. "Performance is assessed, compensated and recognized based on the what and how. They are equally important. How we deliver results is driven by our expectations around cultural attributes."

Through the pandemic, executives hosted podcasts and forums were set up for employees to share their experiences. "It created a greater emotional intimacy within the organization," says Mason. "Everybody went, 'okay, how do we support customers and each other through this?' Our customer satisfaction indices were equal to or higher than before the pandemic and employee engagement was the highest it has been."

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Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures 2020

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRED CEOS 2020

Broader Public Sector

Margaret McNeil, CEO, Canuck Place Children's Hospice (retired)
Growth Joanna Griffiths, Founder and CEO, Knix
Mid-Market Jack Newton, Co-founder and CEO, Clio
Enterprise Dani Reiss, President and CEO, Canada Goose
Transformational Leadership Michael Medline, President and CEO, Empire Company Limited

BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR

■ ALS Society of Canada (Toronto)
■ Covenant Health (Edmonton)
■ Creative Options Regina (Regina)
■ Egg Farmers of Canada (Ottawa)
■ MedicAlert Foundation Canada (Toronto)
■ NorQuest College (Edmonton)
■ Ottawa Community Housing (Ottawa)
■ The Ottawa Hospital (Ottawa)
■ The Standards Council of Canada (Ottawa)
■ Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care (Scarborough, Ont.)

EMERGING

■ DPM Energy Inc. (Vaughan, Ont.)
■ Electromate Inc. (Vaughan, Ont.)
■ Firmex (Toronto)
■ Harmonic Machine Inc. (Chilliwack, B.C.)
■ Humanise Collective (Montreal)
■ Loopio Inc. (Toronto)
■ Roma Moulding (Woodbridge, Ont.)
■ Sleep Therapeutics (Toronto)
■ SureCall (Calgary)
■ The Poirier Group (Toronto)

ThinkData Works (Toronto)

GROWTH

■ Burns & Wilcox Canada (Toronto)
■ Centra Windows Inc. (Langley, B.C.)
■ Det'on Cho Management LP (Yellowknife)
■ Digital Extremes (London, Ont.)
■ East Side Games (Vancouver)
■ Flipp (Etobicoke, Ont.)
■ INVIVO Communications Inc. (Toronto)
■ Jobber (Edmonton)
■ MyHealth Centre (Toronto)
■ Xperigo (Markham, Ont.)

MID-MARKET

■ BentallGreenOak (Toronto)
■ CARFAX (London, Ont.)
■ Coast Capital Savings (Surrey, B.C.)
■ D2L Corporation (Kitchener, Ont.)
■ Geotab (Oakville, Ont.)
■ Killam Apartment REIT (Halifax)
■ Odlum Brown Limited (Vancouver)
■ PointClickCare (Mississauga, Ont.)
■ QSL (Quebec City)
■ RSM Canada (Toronto)

ENTERPRISE

■ AstraZeneca Canada Inc. (Mississauga, Ont.)
■ BMO Financial Group (Toronto)
■ Bruce Power (Tiverton, ON)
■ CWB Financial Group (Edmonton)
■ Loblaw Companies Limited (Brampton, Ont.)
■ Royal Bank of Canada (Toronto)
■ SAP Canada (Vancouver)
■ Schneider Electric (Mississauga, Ont.)
■ Scotiabank (Toronto)
■ Sobeys Inc. (Stellarton, N.S.)

Looking back on a night of celebrations



Honourees feted at gala

Pre-pandemic, Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures honourees were celebrated with a February gala. Clockwise from top: Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone Human Capital, joins comedian Steve Patterson, event emcee, to toast Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures and Canada's Most Admired CEO Award winners; Longo Brothers Fruit Markets Inc. employees celebrate their 2018 Enterprise Award; Reliance Home Comfort team members celebrate the company's 2019 selection in the Enterprise category; Cowan Insurance Group team members celebrate their 2018 Mid-Market Award.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

Success built on trust

THE POIRIER GROUP

KATHRYN BOOTHBY
Postmedia Content Works

The Poirier Group is a boutique management consulting firm focused on process improvement, strategy execution, and sustainable business transformation for clients across North America. David Poirier founded the organization in 2005. Under his leadership, The Poirier Group (TPG) has established a strong corporate culture built on trust, open and honest communication, and fun. Its culture is a badge of honour that drives excellence in its employees. And, it is a key differentiator in the field of management consulting.

"Despite our current distance, due to COVID-19, our team remains committed to supporting one another and our clients, and building an even stronger culture for the future," notes Poirier. "We have always had a strong foundation of values and ensure that everyone in the organization understands them and responds with the appropriate actions."

Those values have helped TPG win a 2020 Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award in the 'emerging' category. A commitment to learning, serving, excellence, and integrity drive sustainable performance for the organization and its clients:

■ Continuous learning is instilled across the organization, from CEO to interns. It stems from a common thirst for knowledge that helps innovate and raise the bar. Company-wide information-sharing and

thought-leadership reinforce this value, as does recognition and reimbursement for the achievement of relevant certifications.

■ Serving is not only directed to clients, but the community at large. It means striving for excellence on behalf of customers while giving back to the community through not-for-profit organizations.

■ Excellence is demonstrated by the 15-year, 100 per cent positive customer experience that TPG has achieved.

It is a testament to the value and exceptional results that it delivers to its clients. But it doesn't mean resting on one's laurels. It provides a guiding light upon which to challenge and continuously improve every assumption and project, notes Poirier.

■ Integrity defines the open,

honest and direct communication and accountability demonstrated by the TPG team.

"It is about owning responsibility for decisions and outcomes, working with others collaboratively rather than competitively, and achieving the best possible results for our customer," explains Poirier.

"We live and breathe our values as an organization every day. They have served us well, certainly in terms

of talent retention, repeat business, and active referrals.

A true testament of our engagement came when one of our consultants received an employee of the month award from a client," says TPG partner, Michael Taylor

When the pandemic changed the rules of that engagement, The Poirier Group had several client projects in play. Pivoting from working onsite with customers to a virtual connection almost



Staff members gathered for a fall, 2019 off-site session in Collingwood, Ont.

PHOTOGRAPH THE POIRIER GROUP

overnight required a major shift in terms of technology and communication.

"Typically, we work with organizations during times of change and stress. When COVID-19 hit, it exacerbated an already challenging situation for our clients," notes Taylor. Yet, TPG has not only been able to meet and even exceed

client expectations during the year-long crisis, but it has also gained additional work,

in large part due to the trust built with clients before the pandemic, and our reputation for excellence in the industry.

"When you engineer something great, build the right team, and have a culture that makes people want to step up, that's when the magic happens. There is no doubt that a winning culture drives higher performance."

The team at TPG has a very diverse set of skills and backgrounds that span engineering, process improvement,

finance, change management,

strategy, and business, to name a few. Subject matter experts cover retail, supply chain, consumer packaged goods, manufacturing, private equity, services business,

as well as government.

"Delivering on our commitments to each client means building the right team for every project.

Bringing the necessary skill sets to the table is just the beginning. Building trust, both internally and with our customers, is critical because it is the foundation of our work approach," says human resources lead, Kayla Brar.

Finding the right fit begins at the recruiting stage.

"We want to ensure that values align, and that whom-

ever is hired has demon-

strated our values in their previous work.

It is not simply about hiring someone with the appropriate background.

We look for examples where candidates have gone above and beyond for clients," notes Brar.

Once hired, onboarding begins with a month-long

partnership with a work

buddy. The buddy provides

support and an introduction

to the company and culture.

Weekly feedback sessions

help alleviate any roadblocks

and provide any additional

resources that are required.

"Our mentorship program

allows employees to choose

who they would like to work

with. It is a very personal re-

lationship, so it is important

that there is a comfort level

on the part of both parties,"

says Brar. "There is a lot of

informal feedback and en-

couragement at TPG at every

level and it all begins in the

first few weeks of employ-

ment. It helps to effectively

bring each new recruit into

our family."

Employees are encour-

aged to put their fingerprints

on the organization and,

regardless of tenure, make

a long-lasting contribution

to the company. "No one is

limited for growth here – you

are not waiting for someone

to move on or up for you to

get to the next step. Success

is self-driven," says Brar.

TPG retention is very

high, with a turnover rate

of just 6.6 percent, which is

below consulting industry

norms. "Our people are our

most valuable asset. We in-

vest in developing each team

member to achieve both

their professional and per-

sonal goals," Brar notes.

Poirier adds, "We are a

very caring organization and

we have a lot of fun together.

We are like a family – we

look out for one another and

we don't always agree, but

everyone is comfortable be-

ing a part of the whole, and

knowing we are here for one

another for the long-term."

That caring also translates

to a strong sense of corpo-

rative social responsibility that

runs throughout TPG. It is

exemplified through its Pur-

pose Beyond Profit initiative.

Through the program, a por-

tion of the team's available resource hours are donated to provide in-kind specialized consulting services to not-for-profit organizations. Our service finds resource efficiencies and administrative savings allowing the charitable organizations and not-for-profits to focus more of the funding and donations on their causes.

"Our goal is to create expo-

nential value for the charities

we work with. By putting con-

sulting expertise to work for

an organization, we can help

create three to four times the

value per year for the services

we provide, which brings a

far greater reward than writ-

ing a cheque. It is extremely

fulfilling to see organizations

better off for our having con-

nected with them. It is also

a tremendous boost for our

team members," notes Poirier.

Last year, TPG donated over \$200,000 in consulting service hours. Some of these services have helped

foundations, community orga-

nizations, not-for-profits and

charities find additional

government funding, en-

hance board management,

and streamline roles and

responsibilities.

During the holidays, the

team continues to give back

to the community with a

"holiday Pay-it-Forward"

Waterstone
CANADA'S
MOST 
ADMIRE
CORPORATE
CULTURES

**You've worked hard to build a corporate culture
that helps you stand out from the crowd.**

We think that deserves to be celebrated!

The Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures™ Awards recognize best-in-class Canadian organizations that are building and sustaining high-performance cultures which help provide a competitive advantage.

Don't miss the chance to recognize your company's high-performance culture — or the culture of a company you admire! Nominations close May 14, 2021.

canadasmostadmired.com

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Waterstone
HUMAN CAPITAL

We Build High Performance Cultures

At Waterstone Human Capital, our team of leadership advisors helps our entrepreneurial-minded, high growth clients unleash the power of their corporate culture to drive high performance and growth.

- Our multi-national leadership **search practice** is best-in-class, connecting our clients with top talent who fit their organization's culture.
- The **Waterstone Culture Institute** offers clients access to:
 - a suite of **leadership and team development programs**, including our flagship program, Building High Performance Teams and Cultures;
 - **Waterstone ENGAGE**, a culture measurement and engagement advisory program that provides data and insights vital to strengthening culture and actioning culture change; and
 - **Waterstone's Culturepreneur Operating System**, a culture curation and transformation process that helps our clients build and sustain high performance cultures.

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“ AT THE BASE LEVEL EVERYONE WANTS WORK THAT IS MEANINGFUL. WE DELIVER THAT WITH OUR SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGE AND IN WHAT WE DO FOR OUR CUSTOMERS AND OUR COMMUNITIES. THAT IS ONE THING THAT IS NOT GOING TO CHANGE. IT'S THE CORE TO WHO WE ARE.

— ADRIAN THOMAS, COUNTRY PRESIDENT

THE SUSTAINABLE PERSPECTIVE ON CORPORATE CULTURE

SCHNEIDER ELECTRIC CANADA

DENISE DEVEAU
Postmedia Content Works

Sustainability is deeply ingrained in the Schneider Electric Canada culture. It is a pillar that, over the years, has expanded its sustainability commitment from the energy and automation ecosystem to embrace all aspects of external and internal operations.

“Now Schneider's sustainability strategy is much broader in scope and more encompassing,” says Adrian Thomas, country president. “It goes very well with our culture and the business we are in. We are committed to leading by example within our own ecosystem including with our people, our operations and our suppliers, as well as our customers.”

Today Schneider Electric in Canada has 2,000 employees located in 29 sites, ranging from head office and sales staff to supply chain, R&D centers, distribution and field staff. This year it has been named a winner in the Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Enterprise category.

Despite the numbers and geographical spread, it has managed to maintain and strengthen its corporate culture throughout these challenging times. In fact, survey results reveal that despite the impact of COVID-19, employee engagement is at all-time high across Canada (up 11 per cent vs. a year ago), while the voluntary turnover rate is a mere 1.2 per cent.

Schneider Electric has established a formalized list of long-term commitments to guide its growth: living up to its principles of trust, creating equal opportunities, harnessing the power of all generations, and empowering local communities — all while acting for a climate positive world. This commitment includes, among its many initiatives, diversity and inclusion programs, implementing new ways of working in a digital age, community programs, smart manufacturing sites, and finding new ways to increase customer engagement.

Like many organizations, the last year has reinforced the importance and impact of culture, Thomas says. “The pandemic has brought certain core values closer to the surface. The early days led to the intermingling of our personal and work lives. Working in a digital format wasn't new to the company,



Adrian Thomas, country president, at Schneider Electric office in Montreal. CHRISTINNE MUSCHI/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Meena Bajwa, left, country senior director of marketing; Thierry Miras, vice-president human resources Canada; Amrit Takhar, talent manager & human resources business partner, outside their office at Schneider Electric. Mississauga, Ont. NICK KOZAK/POSTMEDIA

but with the pandemic we had to become a lot more understanding of each other and even more committed to the concepts of inclusiveness, communications and sharing the realities of work life balance.”

From the initial shutdown, the company leaders have initiated multiple actions to support personal situations and ensure the health and safety of its employees first and foremost, as well as the financial health of the business. Among those action items, it extended its paid care leave policies to support employees who need to care for immediate family members with COVID-19, and provides 10 days of self-quarantine paid leave for employees who suspect they have been exposed.

They have also added a virtual-care assistance program and access to virtual walk-in clinics.

Transitioning to the new normal demanded an approach that was highly flexible and delivered the stability and support employees needed during COVID, says Thierry Miras, vice-president, human resources. “We deployed a furniture program that delivered close to 800 packages to remote workers that include standing desks with adjustable height, ergonomic chairs and monitor arms.”

Remote onboarding was another critical issue to address, Miras notes. To that end they created toolkits for managers and employees to facilitate onboarding of re-

mote employees and generate a sense of belonging despite the remote work challenges. Well-being programs were enhanced to include virtual physical fitness sessions, weekly tips, and information sessions with medical professionals on health issues such as COVID and vaccinations. “People were very appreciative of those sessions,” Miras says.

Staff and management were provided training on conducting virtual forums, technology, camera presence and collaboration tools. Over the past year, they have also

Program (CLP), for example, is a rotational effort that allows new graduates to work in three functional areas (marketing, sales and quotations) over the course of three years to get a deeper and holistic understanding of the business, as they start their careers.

Other initiatives include the Pulse Program, a six-month action learning program that places early career talents with a sponsor, where they can pitch ideas to the leadership team that creatively address business and/or workplace challenges.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) play a key role in sustaining its diverse culture. Examples include Women in Schneider Electric (WISE), Well-Being, Multicultural Alliance, Emerging Professionals Network, Sustainability, and LGBT+ & Allies, with more to come.

One of the newest additions is the Open Talent Market (OTM), a career development platform that uses artificial intelligence to match employee talents and aspirations to projects, mentors and full-time roles at home or internationally.

Schneider has also been a longstanding supporter of the communities it serves. Key partnerships include The Strongest Oak, a Calgary-based NGO focused on tackling poverty in developing countries, whose latest project was building a solar-powered community hub for the town of Pa in Burkina Faso, Africa.

The 20/20 Catalyst program helps empower Indigenous communities' transition to clean and renewable energy through grants, employee donations, mentorship and education. More recently, Schneider Electric's global operations introduced the Tomorrow Rising Fund to fight against COVID-19 through funding emergency actions in areas where it operates. In Canada it has provided grants to local charities that support frontline workers and vulnerable citizens.

Employees are also encouraged to submit their

own projects via the company portal, and are eligible for paid time-off to volunteer and for donation-matching.

An important cornerstone to the company's present and future success is the acceleration of a digitized workplace to adapt to the new work-life balance, from virtual town halls and employee collaboration to digital innovation in serving customers, Thomas maintains.

“We are being bold and trying new things, and turning challenges into opportunities, such as digitally interactive ‘broadcast-like’ experiences that connect employees and customers.”

Communications are now more frequent, thanks to digital technology and the efforts of site ambassadors that serve as a liaison between leaders and staff, he adds.

“Digital has been critical in reinforcing our culture and keeping people motivated in their work. It has made it so much easier to share information en masse and locally. We are reinventing the way we collaborate, innovate and meet with customers.”

While many things have changed in recent months, there are principles that have held firm throughout the challenges. “At the base level everyone wants work that is meaningful,” Thomas says. “We deliver that with our sustainability message and in what we do for our customers and our communities. That is one thing that is not going to change. It's core to who we are.”

SCHNEIDER'S SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY ... GOES VERY WELL WITH OUR CULTURE AND THE BUSINESS WE ARE IN. WE ARE COMMITTED TO LEADING BY EXAMPLE.

introduced a behavioural interview toolkit in parallel to the training to help determine fit and ensure a positive employee experience, while reducing the risk of bias.

A host of well-being initiatives such as virtual yoga and social events were added to the mix, many of which were employee-generated ideas.

Schneider Electric continues to expand and diversify its workforce with professional development programs for all levels, from students and interns to management. The Commercial Leadership

ges. The company is also actively involved in women in STEM networks including universities. As a result of its efforts, 71 per cent of the CLP participants are female graduates. It has also introduced the Virtual Student Experience, where students can participate in virtual micro-internships over four weeks on projects that address key business issues.

Efforts such as these have led to its recognition as one of Canada's Top Employers for Young People and parity certification for Women in Governance.

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Life Is On | Schneider Electric

“ SOBEYS HAS CULTIVATED A STRONGER, MORE DELIBERATE CORPORATE CULTURE TO REINVIGORATE A SENSE OF FAMILY AMONG TEAMMATES. EVERY DAY THEY EMULATE OUR CORE VALUES, FOSTERING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION, TRUST AND EXCELLENCE IN EVERY STORE, DISTRIBUTION CENTRE AND OFFICE. — MICHAEL MEDLINE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, EMPIRE COMPANY LIMITED AND SOBEYS INC.

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO ITS CULTURE

EMPIRE & SOBEYS INC.

DENISE DEVEAU
Postmedia Content Works

When Michael Medline took over the reins of Empire and Sobeys Inc. in 2017, he saw an opportunity for change. The company had grown to the point where the business operations were fragmented and siloed. His first step was to bring the leadership team together to launch a three-year plan called Project Sunrise to rebuild the culture of care, trust and respect that has defined Sobeys' legacy for more than a century.

It was no small task for the winner in the Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Enterprise category. The Stellarton, N.S.-based company has 127,000 employees, a vast majority of which work on the front lines in more than 1,500 branded locations, including Sobeys, Safeway, IGA, Foodland, FreshCo, Thrifty Foods, Farm Boy, Lawton's Drug Stores and ecommerce brand Voilà, with more to come.

Project Sunrise was a sweeping effort that involved opening communications between previously siloed parts of the business, restructuring operations, and empowering business leaders to execute strategic decisions based on innovation and growth.

It also incorporated the ideas of more than 500 employees (a.k.a. teammates), who were asked to elaborate on company values that supported its culture and strategy. Together, the leaders and teammates drafted values that reflect the Sobeys culture at its best.

These were: a customer-driven focus, a people-powered workplace that cultivates care, trust and respect for teammates, community engagement in the communities it serves, and a results-oriented approach to delivering great business outcomes with passion and integrity.

"Through Sunrise, Sobeys has cultivated a stronger, more deliberate corporate culture to reinvigorate a sense of family among teammates," Medline says. "Every day they emulate our core values, fostering a culture of collaboration, trust and excellence in every store, distribution centre and office."

Sobeys also articulated an Employee Value Proposition, outlining the pillars that help inspire teammates: Stand Together (Support), Be Our Best (Thrive), Realize our Potential (Grow), and Make a Difference (Contribute).

As highly valued contributors, teammates at all levels are encouraged to submit ideas to help reinforce its values. Many of those ideas have



With its inspirational Project Sunrise program, Sobeys established a corporate-wide sense of teamwork and dedication to quality customer care among its 127,000 employees across Canada. SOBEYS PHOTOGRAPH COLLAGE

been adopted throughout the organization. Employee input was responsible for policies such as the establishment of sensory-friendly shopping and, more recently, senior shopping hours during the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 crisis, a teammate at Safeway Bonavista store in Calgary created a poster with the message "Tough times don't last. Tough teams do" — a slogan that became the company's rallying cry for 2020.

The revitalized culture

fostered through Project Sunrise proved instrumental in Sobeys' industry-leading response during the pandemic, as it encouraged collaboration between teams at all levels to collaborate and make quick, strategic operational decisions.

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The revitalized culture

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THE PANDEMIC HAS SHONE AN EVEN BRIGHTER LIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH. CHALLENGES FROM EMPLOYEE AND MANAGER PERSPECTIVES HAVE HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING TO BE OUR BEST AND DELIVER VALUE TO OUR CLIENTS, COMMUNITIES AND EACH OTHER. IT IS ESSENTIAL WE HELP EMPLOYEES STAY HEALTHY IN ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES.

— ANDREJKA MASSICOTTE, RBC



Pre-pandemic, employees meeting in an RBC Oasis Social Collaboration Space. *RBC PHOTOGRAPH*

ENABLING FULL POTENTIAL

ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

KATHRYN BOOTHBY
Postmedia Content Works

Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) has a longstanding commitment to the health and well-being of its employees. Now, more than ever, the organization is focused on creating an environment where employees are enabled and empowered to be their best — a place where imagination and insight bring shared visions, values and strategies to fulfill RBC's purpose: helping clients thrive and communities prosper.

Throughout these challenging times, RBC has focused on caring for its employees by introducing a wide array of tools and resources that support health and well-being, and helps balance work with the realities of life during a pandemic.

"Learning to manage remote work and home life while establishing appropriate boundaries has been one of the most challenging aspects of the pandemic. While many are facing similar issues, transitioning global colleagues to working from home, learning how to collaborate virtually, and helping employees to manage their personal circumstances, has been the biggest issue we have faced over the past year," says Andrejka Massicotte, senior director, benefits and global wellness.

At the onset of the pandemic, the organization quickly launched Live, Learn and Lead Together, a centralized hub to help all employees navigate the evolving changes in their personal and professional lives. The site provides an effortless path for employees to access podcasts, tip sheets and discussion forums on a wide range of topics, such as resilience, empathy, mindfulness, as well as resources for kids (and their grown-ups).

Following the launch of the Live, Learn and Lead Together hub, RBC pivoted to a new way of listening with a series of Well-Being Pulse Surveys. These surveys have helped RBC to better understand how employees are doing, and to provide meaningful support.

"While everyone is working at home, we're all balancing our own unique responsibilities. Some employees are living alone and feeling isolated, while others are managing children and the challenges of virtual learning. The Pulse Surveys are about listening and learning how we can support based on individual needs," explains Massicotte.

These purposeful listening activities revealed an increased need for mental health support and resources to enable work-life balance while working remotely. The pandemic has exacerbated concerns around mental health and while the organization has been a long-time leader in investing

in the mental well-being of its employees, it saw a need to do even more.

In March of this year, RBC took a decisive, co-ordinated approach to address the issue with the launch of an integrated program that builds on the enterprise-wide mental health blueprint implemented in 2017. The ultimate goal is to create an environment where employees understand that mental well-being is as important as physical well-being, and feel safe to speak openly about their own mental health.

Weekly podcasts with medical experts from the Cleveland Clinic have helped ease stress and anxiety levels, a video series with CEO Dave McKay and acclaimed astronaut Chris Hadfield offers tips and techniques for managing social isolation, and the organization's 24/7 EmployeeCare program provides direct, no-cost counseling and support.

Mental health has also become a key pillar of RBC's people manager goals. Executive mental health training and on-demand coaching, focused on building resili-

mental health, he says.

"Having two highly respected executives set the tone from the top for mental health awareness from the very beginning of the pandemic was significant and an extremely positive example for the entire organization. The continuation of support that has followed around the theme that we are all human, is quite profound."

Earlier in his life, Thibodeau experienced his own challenges with mental health. "To finally be able to speak about a difficult time in my life, and hear other's experiences with family, friends or themselves, opened up a dialogue about understanding, acceptance, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace. Additional sessions provided strategies for connecting with team members and clients by demonstrating empathy, care and kindness. Simple tips for managing personal stress and anxiety levels have been particularly valuable."

Lauren Friese, vice-president, future of work and culture, says that since the inception of the integrated mental health program, people are speaking more openly about the issues.

"It has been incredible to watch so many colleagues mobilize to help each other — whether by sharing resources and personal stories, hosting events and workshops, or by simply listening. RBCers really care about each other."

The drive to ensure a healthy workplace con-

tinues. RBC recently announced that all employees will have access to the Headspace meditation and mindfulness app for a year. Employees were also given an additional vacation day for 2021. Beyond this extra day, RBC has directly acknowledged the ongoing pressures of the pandemic, especially in regions experiencing lockdowns. Employees have been encouraged to prioritize personal time and be mindful about work-life boundaries. Senior executives have been asked to eliminate the stigma associated with asking for time to focus, concentrate, and in some cases, log-off.

"The pandemic has shone an even brighter light on mental health. Challenges from employee and manager perspectives have highlighted the importance of well-being to be our best and deliver value to our clients, communities and each other. It is essential that we help employees stay healthy in all aspects of their lives," says Massicotte.

Friese adds, "We're building on our success to become an even more human-centric organization. It's the future of work: where employees feel safe and empowered to bring their full potential to the table, including their ideas, imaginations and insights."

For its ongoing commitment to excellence in corporate culture RBC has achieved a Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award in the Enterprise category.

LEARNING TO MANAGE REMOTE WORK AND HOME LIFE WHILE ESTABLISHING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF THE PANDEMIC.

This integrated mental health campaign brings together expanded services, programs and enablement for employees.

The benefits for mental health and support have increased in many global regions, including an increase in psychological benefits from \$3,000 to \$5,000 for employees in Canada. There's also curated learning content and wellness campaigns to reduce stigma, increase awareness, and inspire conversations about mental and overall well-being.

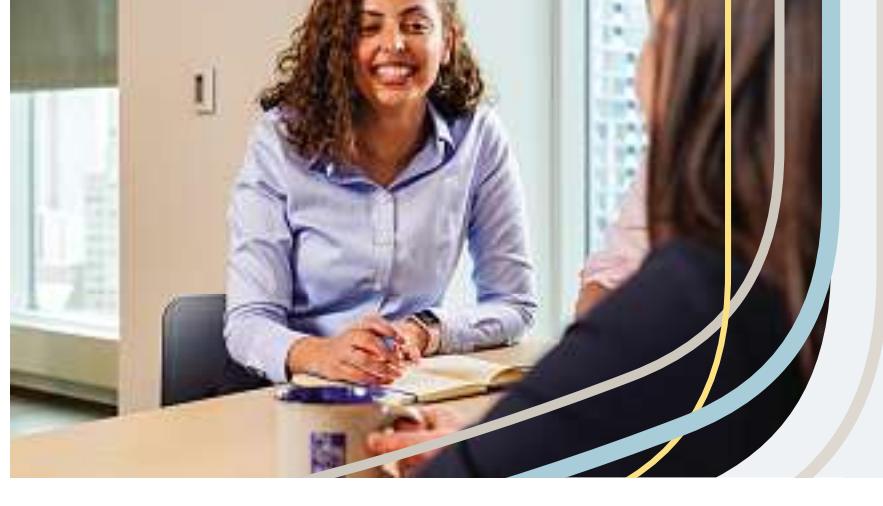
ence and leadership skills, has helped managers support individuals and teams during these difficult times.

Martin Thibodeau, regional president for RBC in British Columbia, gained valuable insights from his participation in an executive leadership mental health training event. The three-hour workshop, led by RBC's chief executive officer and chief human resources officer, was an inspiring event where 400 executives shared personal stories to remove some of the stigma associated with

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“WE'RE COMPASSIONATE TO OUR STAFF AND OUR COMMUNITY. WE BELIEVE PEOPLE ARE MORE ENGAGED AND PRODUCTIVE IN A CULTURE OF CARING. WE ARE ALL INTERTWINED TO THE POINT WHERE WE'RE NOT BASED ON A HIERARCHY. EVERYTHING IS DONE DEMOCRATICALLY.” — DIGITAL EXTREMES PRESIDENT MIKE SCHMALZ

Corporate culture thrives on employee care, love of the games

DIGITAL EXTREMES

DENISE DEVEAU
Postmedia Content Works

For 28 years, Digital Extremes has been a growing presence in the gaming world. Founded in 1993 by James Schmalz, the company really hit its stride when it launched Warframe in 2013, a free-to-play, games-as-a-service title that has kept the company at the forefront of the highly competitive video game industry ever since.

Not only has Digital Extremes garnered awards for its innovative games, it has been recognized for its progressive studio culture, including a 2021 Canada's Most Admired Corporate Culture award in the Growth category.

Throughout its years of expansion, the London, Ont.-based company has managed to maintain a family-based and diverse culture. Today it has more than 360 staff in London, a satellite office in Irvine, Calif., many of whom have been with the company for years, and individual staff working from locations worldwide.

Since Schmalz started the business, the company's values have been based on a commitment to valuing its staff above everything else. DE's key pillars center on community activity, transparency and communication on all fronts, from its in-house operations to its outreach to the international gaming community to local charities.

His brother Mike Schmalz joined as president in 2003 when they had 40 staff in London and Toronto. They quickly amalgamated the operations in London, and seven years later opened the U.S. satellite office.

“We grew relatively quickly around 2005 and have been on a steady growth path ever since,” he says. When Warframe was released in 2013, the company didn't have an in-house customer support or marketing team. “The launch was so successful we spent the next two years expanding to 100 people.”

He believes the strength of Digital Extremes' culture lies in its compassion. “We're compassionate to our staff and our community. We believe people are more engaged and productive in a culture of caring. We are all intertwined to the point where we're not based on a hierarchy. Everything is done democratically.”

When a new staff member is hired, for example, a variety of team members take part in the interview process to determine if they are suit-



Office manager Lauren Korkidakis and systems analyst Jake Hansen discuss daily company business, such as getting new employees bio-tagged so they can use their fingerprints to enter the studio. PHOTOGRAPH DEAN BERGMANN, DE MULTIMEDIA PRODUCER AND LIVESTREAM DEVELOPER

ed to the culture. “It's really important in our industry that everyone gets along. We want to know if the person is someone they would want to collaborate creatively with on games or have lunch with.”

At the same time people have a lot of autonomy, says HR director Heidi Flynn. “Anyone who comes here sees very quickly they can connect directly with a technical director, manager, or anyone on the senior leadership team, and make recommendations and will be listened to.”

Turnover is especially high in the gaming industry, yet Digital Extremes has managed to beat the trend,

Digital Extremes, almost half are developers, says Sheldon Carter, chief operating officer who heads up the development team.

“Even when we were small, we always knew our greatest advantage was our people. They are the crucible to building up the abilities we needed to create something like Warframe. We really had to make this a great place to work, so we instituted tons of programs, like education and travel allowances, conferences, anything to develop the skills they needed including hiring an executive chef to make phenomenal free lunches.”

thing they needed to work from home.”

Employee health and wellness, including mental health, has always been a No. 1 priority, says Flynn, who spends a good deal of time each day talking to individual employees, providing support and checking in on employees' well-being.

Flynn and her team spearheaded the implementation of a mental health platform to further support them during lockdown. “The amount of usage and feedback we've had with our new app Dialogue has been phenomenal. Our staff can access medical professionals directly without having to leave their homes or visit a doctor's office.”

They recently increased their fitness subsidy to allow employees to start a home gym that would benefit them during quarantine to purchase equipment, online health programs and hire virtual fitness coaches. Another addition is the Applauz reward and recognition platform that allows managers and peers to provide on-the-spot rewards.

A popular perk is the RSP matching program. “We also have an incredible profit sharing bonus program,” Flynn notes. “And everyone receives a holiday bonus in December.”

During the pandemic, the executive chef and his team have been helping employees learn to cook at home, providing YouTube videos and amazing recipes. Digital Extremes also partners with Chef's Hat in London to send out gift meals each week to employees. The gaming community at large is also inextricably linked to their

success. Digital Extremes' annual Warframe TennoCon event brings together thousands of gamers from all over the world for live streaming events, updates, and to meet the development team. “It powers up our whole team for the next year,” Carter says. “Warframe is a shared game that we make with our players, not for them. Their feedback is a massive part of what we do.”

Last year's event was all-digital, replicating the live event as closely as possible, setting up different virtual rooms for players to interact, announcing big reveals and showing their costumes. This year's TennoCon also will be all-digital.

“The culture exists here because we made it what we wanted,” Schmalz says. “We didn't have a model, other than be nice, treat others with respect, and be there for them and they will give back to you. It works itself out, as long as you're there for them. Then we just have to manage the workflow to try to contain the creativity. What comes out of that crazy process is a game like Warframe that's one of the top in the world.”

Community first

From the executive to the community levels, the biggest focus since Warframe launched has been to create a studio culture where people are fully engaged, including what charities people are interested in and finding ways to allow them to support those. “It's important to understand what is meaningful to them personally,” says Schmalz.

Community support at a local level is a point of immense pride for Digital Extremes. The company goes out of its way to seek out charities within their community including London WISH, Anago, CMHC, Children's Health Foundation, The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada, and teen shelters, mental health facilities, food banks, and individual families they find through the School Board, Flynn says.

“We go out of our way to seek smaller organizations that aren't in the news and that truly need the help,” she explains. “A lot of these organizations potentially do not get a lot of support. Sometimes it's something as simple as a car seat for a new baby or other necessities a family could be in great need for.”

Digital Extremes employees are all in when it comes to their charitable efforts. Flynn often reaches out to the staff to ask them if anybody they know personally needs help.

“Our fundraising efforts during the holidays are 100% driven by our employees. Digital Extremes matches the employees' contributions, allowing us to help so many more people. Together we're able to make a real difference for people who truly need it. We all love that. We are a family and we always come together no matter what the cause.”

WE REALLY WORKED HARD TO BUILD A COMPANY WHERE EVERYONE KNOWS EACH OTHER'S NAMES AND ENJOYS COMING TO WORK

Schmalz reports. “Most of the team who was here when I joined are still on staff. Turnover has been really low.”

Schmalz admits it's not always easy in an industry where developers have their sights on larger communities like Montreal, Toronto, New York or San Francisco. But once people get a peek into Digital Extremes' studio culture, they end up loving it. “We really worked to build a company where everyone knows each other's names and enjoys coming to work.”

Success in the gaming community is also driven by creativity and collaboration. Of the 360 employees at

When the office shut down, the operations team stepped up to keep the engagement factor going, Schmalz says. “We're a young company and we like to socialize together. Celebrations are great moments for us. That connectedness has not suffered from COVID-19. We've invested in our employees and carried on the same engagement and caring but just through virtual platforms.”

They went out of their way to equip staff with everything they needed to cope — from equipment to health and wellness support. “We assisted employees by equipping them with every-



“ [OUR TEAM MEMBERS] STILL WANT TO SUPPORT AND BE PART OF THE THINGS ODLUM BROWN DOES — NOT JUST IN THEIR WORK, BUT IN HOW WE TRY TO BE GOOD CORPORATE CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS.

THAT TELLS ME THAT WHEN PEOPLE GET UP IN THE MORNING AND START WORKING, WHEREVER THEY MIGHT BE, THEY'RE AT ODLUM BROWN. — ODLUM BROWN PRESIDENT AND CEO DEBRA HEWSON

A CULTURE OF CARING

ODLUM BROWN LIMITED

KATHRYN BOOTHBY
Postmedia Content Works

At Odium Brown Limited, corporate culture is not simply about ensuring team members have what they need to perform their role at the firm — it's about giving them what they need to move through life in a positive way, says Debra Hewson, president and CEO. "You can't be happy at work if you're not happy in life. We're really saying to people: we care about you, and not just when you're here from 8 to 4."

Employee-owned since it was established in 1923, Odium Brown is an independent, full-service investment firm with a team of over 300 people. A continuing culture of excellence has earned Odium Brown a second Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award in the Mid-Market category, having first achieved this recognition in 2017. The firm also recently attained a 9.2 out of 10 corporate culture rating in Investment Executive's 2020 Brokerage Report Card, well exceeding the performance average of 8.5, as well as an exceptional 80+ Net Promoter Score on Waterstone Human Capital's ENGAGE Mini Survey.

"All of our culture initiatives are anchored around our belief in having meaning and purpose in your work, and we've found that translates to a really rewarding employee experience," says Barbara Bahry, vice-president of organizational development.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic required Odium Brown to shift the majority of its team members from six locations across B.C. to remote working within days. During this unexpected challenge, the company focused not only on how to continue to serve its clients but also on how to keep its family-like culture alive and strong and continue to support local communities.

Many things have helped navigate the firm through the past year: its long history of experiencing and learning from historic events (Odium Brown will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2023); a culture of accountable leadership; a 'we're all in this together' ethos stemming from a commitment to remain an employee-owned firm; and the deeply held value of taking care of the communities where its team members live and work. By focusing on innovative solutions to nurture its culture, the company has confirmed what it has always known: the Odium Brown culture lives beyond the four walls of its offices.



#OBStrong #OBConnected



Odium Brown team members show off their branded masks during the virtual culture-building initiative #OBConnected.

PHOTOGRAPH ODLUM BROWN

"I've found there's a real continuum of how people have reacted to COVID. Our goal is to keep moving the business forward while being mindful of that continuum and trying to include everyone," Hewson says. "Leading through crisis is about being genuine in your communications, and we try to foster that throughout the organization. I hope no one would say I'm a different leader in a crisis than the rest of the time. This past year has been challenging, but in terms of leadership, it has really been about doing more of what we already do."

Over the past several years, Odium Brown has invested significantly in leadership as a core competency, anchored around the belief that leadership is a mindset, not just a role. Team members are oriented to this mindset through The Leadership Contract™ workshops, based on the book of the same name by Dr. Vince Molinaro. Ultimately, participants create a personal leadership roadmap and commit to the four principles of the contract: leadership is a decision; leadership is an obligation; leadership is hard work; and leadership is a community. The

program does not take a 'one-hit-wonder' approach, however. Bahry affirms, "It is woven into everything we do, from our performance management program, to rewards and compensation, to the value proposition for our team members."

The firm's #OBStrong

communications initiative has provided a unifying message throughout the pandemic and accompanying uncertainty. "Initially I was

saying: we're going to get

through this. We're resilient.

ledge their hard work and creativity, and to simply help everyone stay connected.

The success of communication initiatives such as #OBStrong, and the solid foundation of the firm's culture as a whole, was validated through regular pulse checks with team members. And, when it came time to reimagine a soft return to the office, these tools were used to open and further discussions about safety and how things might look. In one instance, Hewson pro-

turning to the workplace: connecting with each other. "When cohorts came back to the office during a period of looser restrictions, the excitement and enthusiasm of our team members when they saw each other really demonstrated the strength of our culture," says Bahry.

Amid the pandemic, not-for-profit organizations have been facing particular hardship. Odium Brown's commitment to philanthropy and local communities has not waned, however. The firm supports over 150 charitable organizations across British Columbia and nationally, with corporate donations and sponsorships now exceeding \$1.4 million annually. During COVID-19, virtual event alternatives, such as those presented by Bard on the Beach, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and Easter Seals BC & Yukon, were also sponsored by Odium Brown.

The Odium Brown team,

as a collective from their remote locations, has also continued fundraising through special virtual events such as CKNW Kids' Fund Pink Shirt Day and BC Children's Hospital Foundation's Jean Up. "The amount of engagement we get from these events doesn't surprise me, but it warms my

“ THAT SENSE OF CARING... IS SOMETHING THAT ATTRACTED ME TO THIS FIRM 30 YEARS AGO, AND WE'VE CONTINUED TO BUILD ON AND NURTURE THAT FEELING.

We've been around for nearly 100 years, we've made it through a lot — and we're going to do it again," says Hewson. "That culminated in signing off communications with #OBStrong. It became a touchstone." Under the catchphrase, video messages from the CEO were distributed to the Odium Brown team to provide updates, acknowledg-

ed a video walk-through showing the new workspace features to help familiarize everyone with the setup, which provided peace of mind to returning team members and reaffirmed that Odium Brown cares about their safety and comfort level. This allowed team members to focus on the truly important part of re-

heart every time I see it," says Hewson. "People still want to support and be a part of the things Odium Brown does — not just in their work, but in how we try to be good corporate citizens and community partners. That tells me that when people get up in the morning and start working, wherever they might be, they're at Odium Brown."

When it comes to the health and wellness of its 300-member team, Odium Brown nurtures the employee experience in five key areas: I matter; I belong; I'm enabled; I contribute; I'm respected. "We take a holistic view that includes not only physical and emotional well-being, but financial and personal health as well," notes Bahry. "Mental health, mindfulness and managing one's self go beyond a dedicated week or month. They are part of a continuous journey throughout the year."

To that end, Odium Brown has offered ongoing webinar series to team members on topics such as mental health, mindfulness and financial wellness, supplemented by emails with tips on working remotely and taking care of our mental health. Because relationships are so fundamental to both personal wellness and Odium Brown's culture, this was also a priority, and a 'Staying Connected' survey gathered and shared strategies on how team members were staying connected with one another and loved ones during the pandemic. Recognizing the importance of gratitude, an #OBGivesThanks initiative gathered material from team members and their families — think photos of the 7 PM cheer or kids' hand-drawn hearts displayed in the window — to share appreciation with one another and pay tribute to the community's frontline heroes.

Odium Brown recognizes that its people are one of its greatest competitive advantages and that retaining top talent is paramount. The significant investment in its corporate culture has rewarded Odium Brown with an extremely low employee turnover rate and an average tenure of 11 years. Currently more than 43 per cent of the workforce has been with the firm for 10 years or more, and 22 per cent for 20 years or more. As of February 2021, the company manages over \$16 billion of client assets.

Indeed, Odium Brown has emerged from the pandemic on strong footing — importantly, with its team and culture intact. "That sense of caring I talked about before is something that attracted me to this firm 30 years ago," says Hewson, "and we've continued to build on and nurture that feeling. That's really the big success of the firm."

In our nearly 100 years as a firm, Odium Brown Limited has experienced and learned from a multitude of global events. Now we are putting those decades of hard-earned resilience to work for our clients.

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GENTLE TEACHING IS ROOTED IN THE FOUNDATION OF WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE SUPPORT THOSE IN OUR COMMUNITY AND EACH OTHER. IT HELPS US TO SEE THE VALUE IN EACH INDIVIDUAL AND PLACE IT AT THE CENTRE OF OUR CAREGIVING AND OUR CULTURE. WHEN PEOPLE ARE NURTURED, THEY FLOURISH. — MORIANNA FINK, MEMBER OF COR MENTORSHIP AND OUTREACH TEAM

A culture built on gentle teaching

CREATIVE OPTIONS REGINA

KATHRYN BOOTHBY
Postmedia Content Works

Three words that exemplify the corporate culture at Creative Options Regina are family, value and respect. "Everyone here is a passionate individual who embodies our culture of gentleness to the fullest. We nurture a culture of belonging, lead with purpose and we approach people with compassion," says CEO Michael Lavis.

Creative Options Regina (COR) is a non-profit charitable organization that provides support to youth and adults experiencing intellectual disability and mental health struggles.

A conscious decision to nurture the health and well-being of COR employees has helped bring exceptional care to the people and families that the organization supports. That focus has also brought COR a Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award in the Broader Public Sector category.

When COR was established 10 years ago, the founders were determined to challenge the status quo and demonstrate that care could be done differently. The goal was to give those they serve the opportunity for choice and control in their lives, and put each person in the driver's seat of their own destiny. In embracing the Gentle Teaching philosophy, that goal has been, and continues to be, met.

The Gentle Teaching philosophy is a passion for the COR team. Morianna Fink, member of the organization's mentorship and outreach team, says, "Gentle Teaching is rooted in the foundation of who we are and how we support those in our community and each other. It helps us to see the value in each individual and place it at the centre of our caregiving and our culture. When people are nurtured, they flourish."

Gentle Teaching is built on four pillars:

Safety When a person feels safe, both physically and emotionally, he/she can begin to heal.

Unconditional love When a person is valued, they learn



COR family members: People supported together with COR employees celebrating. PHOTOGRAPHS SAWYER MORRIS

that life can be good and hopeful.

Loving When you are loving, and others reach out to receive that love, it builds trust.

Engagement A relationship built on safety, trust and love brings engagement and the freedom to make choices while knowing that support is always available.

To help support these pillars Gentle Teaching uses four primary tools that help shape relationships with coworkers, family, spouse,

friends and more:

Hands Use hands to help, never to harm.

Eyes Look at others kindly and uplift them.

Words Use words to build up, not tear down.

Presence Be in the moment and non-demanding in every encounter.

Gentle Teaching is the most important aspect of all new employee training. Coaching takes that training further and allows people to have important conversations with their teams and

with each other so that any struggles are addressed proactively," says Fink.

The pandemic brought overwhelming confusion and challenges for those to whom the organization provides services. In concert, employees were nervous and concerned about the health and well-being of their own families and loved ones. Yet still the strength, resiliency, and caring of the COR team came through.

"COVID shone a light on the challenges of caregiving,

We hope that the learning throughout this pandemic will create change in systems that have long been forgotten.

Our approach is quite unique and only practised by a handful of organizations. We have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate how care can be done differently," says Lavis. "Our gentle approach is not only for those we provide services to, but woven throughout the fabric of our organization and how we interact with our partners, families, and

stakeholders. It is having a profound impact on our entire community."

COR has a young workforce and over 90 per cent joined the organization without prior experience in the disability services sector. The approach to recruitment is very different from the norm, says Casey Sakires, employee experience adviser with COR. "We do not post support positions. Instead, we look for creative ways to share what we do and start conversations with potential candidates. That includes being active in the community, participating in marathons and other events, and through our corporate social responsibility programs."

While the organization attracts a great many students of social work and kinesiology, surprisingly those with less obvious backgrounds such as engineering and education also find a fit with COR values. "It's about finding people who really want to make a difference in the lives of others and who mesh well with our Gentle Teaching ideals," notes Sakires. "Just as we do in the outside community, we celebrate the diversity of thought that a wide range of expertise brings to the team. Once on board, each individual is supported to the fullest with tools and training, mental health resources, and opportunities to grow and learn beyond COR."

Staying true to its roots, and using the principles of Gentle Teaching as a guide, COR remains committed to nurturing a culture of gentleness and belonging, where everyone feels safe and valued. Through the learning and experiences of the past 10 years, and the people who have supported the organization along the way, COR will continue to grow.

That growth will come through enhancing the employee experience, cultivating strong leaders, and bringing flexibility to the workplace; strengthening mentorship while deepening the coaching culture; embracing a holistic approach to wellness; building strong, resilient teams to support the evolving needs of the community; ensuring values and purpose align across the organization; and building stronger connections where everyone's gifts and contributions are welcomed and celebrated.

Kindness counts

To actively express its commitment to the pillars of the Gentle Teaching, COR initiated its 100 Acts of Kindness campaign. The program, which initially began as a winter blues buster activity four years ago, has morphed into a community-driven mobile surprise party to recognize the silent heroes in everyday life.

The success of the campaign came from community partners and the general public that nominated difference-makers in their circle. "These are the people that walk among us and bring us joy in the seemingly little

things they do. Whether it's providing change at a gas station, putting in overtime in the classroom, or keeping our community clean, these are giants that rarely look for appreciation — and that is why we need to recognize them," says Ben Morris, COR's creative director.

In 2019 COR partnered with Strategy Lab Marketing, My 92.1 FM, Campbell Collegiate, and students at the University of Regina to

help expand the program reach.

"There are so many incredible stories to share. Like the university custodian who we were lucky enough to celebrate. We found him mopping floors, gifted him with a cupcake and t-shirt, and shared words of appreciation from members of the community.

He was moved to tears by a level of kindness he had never before received. You really don't realize how much such a

small act can mean to one individual until you experience it firsthand."

In 2020, the pandemic changed everything. Public recognition became impossible in an instant as everything shut down. "There was concern we may not bring the program back, but the community showed us some love and rose to the challenge. We partnered with our local high school and began socially-distanced, video-

recorded surprises that were posted to social media."

The campaign has become such a success that COR is now taking calls from communities across Saskatchewan looking to be a part of the 100 Acts of Kindness movement. "This inspirational program has taken our whole organization and philosophy and wrapped it in a blanket of kindness that we live, breath and share with others."



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“WE HAD TWO PRIORITIES DURING THE PANDEMIC. THE FIRST ONE WAS TO PROTECT THE FINANCIAL HEALTH OF THE BUSINESS AND THE SECOND WAS TO PROTECT EVERYONE'S JOB. WE ACHIEVED BOTH. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING WE ACHIEVED WAS CONTINUING TO BUILD ON OUR GREAT CULTURE. — DAN TURNER, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, XPERIGO

People-first culture goes the extra mile

XPERIGO

DENISE DEVEAU
Postmedia Content Works

Every morning the executive team at Xperigo has a huddle session to go over the day's agenda. The No. 1 item on their list every day: what they can do to make their team members' — and their customers' — lives better.

This people-first approach to business is something that has been an integral part of the Xperigo culture for years. In 2013, a new executive team was appointed to transform Xperigo's business model and culture. It was clear to Dan Turner, then vice-president, business development and now president and CEO, that the market was evolving and Xperigo needed to re-energize and focus on a people-first culture.

"I could tell this was going to be something special. We were essentially starting a new company based on transparency and trust while cultivating potential at all levels." Their efforts have reaped rewards for the business, and many accolades, including back-to-back wins for Canada's Most Admired Corporate Culture in the Growth category.

Xperigo provides premium, end-to-end customer experience management services offering white-labeled automotive call centre and roadside assistance to consumers for 43 automotive brands in North America. Over the past three years alone the company has gone through significant changes that the culture has passed with flying colours. The first was establishing a Moncton, N.B. office in 2017 that more than tripled the size of the staff.

"We knew we had done fairly well in the Toronto market finding people to fit our culture," Turner says. "Our challenge was how to pass that on to the new site, which had a lot more team members. How could we lift and shift everything we did in Ontario and achieve the same results in New Brunswick?"

What they didn't want was a situation where offices



Members of the Xperigo team: Clockwise from top - Jessica Babin and Jody Lively present a cheque to Crossroads for Women in Moncton, N.B.; Jeff Gallon, vice-president, technology and innovation, with Kelvin Cheung, data analyst; new president and CEO Dan Turner. XPERIGO PHOTOGRAPHS

were competing, he explains. "I didn't like the notion there was a Moncton team and a Markham team. We are all one team."

One outcome was the establishment of an inter-departmental, cross-functional X1 task force whose mission was to remove any location and departmental silos and create a one-team environment that promoted diversity, equality and inclusion.

"For the first time we embedded culture in the board-approved strategy," says task force member Brad Kellock, vice-president, sales and marketing. "All of us understood that a high-performing culture is one where everyone, from the CEO to front-line agents, are in alignment with our goals."

When they opened the

Moncton space, they also started the "Life is Better Here" branding to differentiate the organization within the call centre space.

One of the first moves was an overhaul of the bonus system to ensure that everyone was rewarded fairly. "We did that right out of the gate, so we all pursue one goal," Turner says. "Now we're all rowing in the same direction and supporting each other."

The pandemic was the second test they had to face.

As it turned out, it actually helped their efforts, Kellock says. "COVID was a catalyst to explore new options, testing new systems and allowing us to communicate virtually with the entire organization, so everyone is hearing the same information at the exact same time. COVID also focused us on finding new channels we could use to engage in culture. We now have more touch-points than we ever had with our physical offices."

"With COVID we are making sure our teams are connecting more often in a virtual environment," says Shelly Cohen-Bhamani, vice-president, talent and culture. "We put an extra effort into making daily touch-points at the start of the day to find out where people need help, their priorities, their state of mind and health."

They also added resources to help team members work from home, introduced new benefits, and expanded the wellness program to include gym equipment purchases, virtual apps and cognitive therapy. "We're really promoting our employee assistance program to take care of their whole well-being," she says.

New recognition programs are providing an added moral boost, Cohen-Bha-

mani notes. "Online meeting platforms are allowing us to celebrate and showcase team member accomplishments. In addition, we launched a transparent and interactive recognition portal for people to nominate their peers."

While COVID delivered unprecedented challenges the culture held strong, Turner says. "We had two priorities during the pandemic. The first one was to protect the financial health of the business and the second was to protect everyone's job. We achieved both. The most important thing we achieved was continuing to build on our great culture."

A recent pulse survey shows that, rather than losing ground, they improved in several key areas from the survey taken prior to the pandemic. "It was almost short of miraculous, given that in working in a virtual environment we had to throw what drove a lot of our culture out the window," Turner says. "We challenged everyone to create a new toolbox for making personal connections."

Turner's passion for Xperigo's people comes through loud and clear in his monthly president's messages from his home office, where he takes the time to discuss everything from financials and performance to sharing personal anecdotes and staff accomplishments. "I pretty much say that in every video, more than anything else, this is a people-first organization. Every decision we make factors in the impact it would have on our people first."

The communications work both ways. An ideas portal was set up so that people from every area can give their ideas on how Xperigo can improve culture and engagement, Turner says. "All ideas are welcome. Every single team member has a voice and is encouraged to share information."

People often ask him the key to their successful culture. "It's not a magic formula. It's about caring about people and meaning it," he says. "No matter the decisions, their wants and needs come first. We approach everything from that perspective."

The Xperigo way: advancement from within

Xperigo has long had a policy of supporting advancement from within, says Shelly Cohen-Bhamani, vice-president, talent and culture.

"We go out of our way to help those who want to advance in their careers. If anyone expresses an interest in growing with us, we work with them to build an individual development plan to get them where they want to be," she says.

That path could include

training, support and tuition reimbursement where needed. "The goal is to help them grow with us. We want them to be part of our future."

Chris Gravelle, vice-president, customer experience in Moncton, spent 22 years in the contact centre industry. Xperigo's quarterly career discussions stand out from other contact centres he has worked with. "They talk to you about where you want to go. From that they develop an action plan to get

you there. In other organizations, employees don't often have an opportunity to talk about your personal and professional aspirations."

Melody Razavoussi in product innovation started at Xperigo part-time when she was in high school. "I have done a bit of everything, from solutions specialist to design, internal auditing and peer coaching. I'm always vocal about the different directions I may be able to take and I know what I'm able to do."

Shannon Simpson, account and club relations manager, joined the company 20 years ago after graduating from school and moved through several roles and accreditation courses over the years.

"The sky's the limit in terms of potential. I have my sights on what's next. I'd love a director or VP role. I've already mentioned that in my last performance review, and I can't wait to see what's next."



Melody Razavoussi, left, and Shannon Simpson. XPERIGO

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