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Take Care

YOUR PATH TO A HEALTHY FIRM, HEALTHY
CLIENTS AND A HEALTHY BUSINESS

FOR *Your team*

Rx

DOB

Team Building

A simple truth: PTO alone isn't enough to combat burnout, and there's no one-size-fits-all way to keep a team happy and healthy. In search of solutions, we asked four designers how they built a company culture that prioritizes wellness.

x **AS TOLD TO KAITLIN PETERSEN** date *Spring 2023*



THE SMALL STUFF

For **Tracy Morris**, building a team means treating her employees the way she wants to be treated in the workplace. That means taking a flexible approach to working hours—but as the McLean, Virginia–based designer describes, it's also about paying attention to the details and making sure everyone feels acknowledged for a job well done.

You have a refreshing approach to valuing your team and their time. What inspired your thinking there?

I know that a lot of employers have been burned, but I think making things comfortable and accommodating for your staff is very different than being taken advantage of. We have a 15-day leave policy—that includes sick leave, vacation and personal time. In addition, I give the team two weeks off at Christmas, a week off at Thanksgiving, and four to five days around the Fourth of July. I also believe that exercise is so important for your mindset and your health, so team members can leave early to go to a spin or yoga class. If you've got a class with an instructor who you adore but it's hard to get there because it starts at 5:15 p.m.—OK, leave at 4:30 p.m. and let me know that you'll make up your time. I think that's imperative.

I also don't believe in people sitting in traffic. It's such a terrible waste of time, and it drives me crazy. Where we are, the difference between local roads and toll roads can be up to an hour, but it can also be expensive—as much as \$50 one way. One of my colleagues lives down I-95, which is a north-south road in D.C. that is just a bear. She kept saying, "Oh, my gosh, the traffic." I asked her, "Why aren't you taking the hot lanes?" And she said, "Well, it can be pretty expensive." And I was thinking to myself, "I can either have you here billing your hourly rate for the company or I can have you stuck in traffic and miserable. This is a no-brainer." So now I pay for the team's EZ Passes. They look at Google Maps and if the traffic is terrible, they take the toll road home.

That's a really big expense.

It can be, but at the same time, they respect me enough to not abuse it.

How do you create that kind of culture? Because some of this stuff only works if you've got a team of people who do have that respect.

My team knows that I am not going to make them do anything I would not do myself—we've had that respect for one another from day one. I am cleaning toilets, sweeping floors and moving rugs with them. There's no, "get me some coffee" or "drop off my dry cleaning" here. We are a team.

It's easy to say that respect is a core value of your business, but it's much harder to do that in a 360-degree way all the time.

Exactly. I have seen employees treat employers badly, I have seen employers treat employees badly and I've seen clients treat both employees and employers badly. But the second you allow somebody to cross that line, you're done. If somebody is going to be rude and inconsiderate, they will always be rude and inconsiderate, and I won't tolerate it. If somebody is rude to my team, it is nipped in the bud immediately.

What does that conversation look like in practice?

That conversation is, "I understand that maybe this did not go the way you were expecting, but your communication style toward my employee is not tolerated. Thank you very much for your interest in our firm, but I'm going to find you somebody else who's a better fit." Having respect all the way around is imperative to what we're doing—and really, to anything.

Are there any downsides to your approach, whether in cost, effort, time or outcome?

There are always trade-offs. Mine is especially with time. It definitely takes more time with the way I approach things—I know there are plenty of people who would say this is inefficient, but I also think it's a personable and empathetic approach.

It can also be costly. I know I spend more money than most employers, but it's very important to me that the team gets spot bonuses—it's nice to give a couple hundred dollars of additional cash here and there. It doesn't feel so formal, and it makes them feel like, "Oh, wow, this is special."

What about things like health care?

I had a situation previously where I was laid off and then had to use COBRA for my health insurance, and it was a complicated process. So I let my team choose their health plan. They put it under their name because I believe health insurance is very personal, and then I cover whatever it costs. So if it's \$300 a month, I put that times 12 in their paycheck. We also offer a matched 401K because I think it's important to let them know that their future is being considered.

OPPOSITE:

Tracy Morris designed this tone-on-tone whiskey room in rich shades of indigo as a retreat for her clients to unwind and relax.

If a principal wants to start taking a more thoughtful approach to their team's happiness, where would you suggest they start?

Start by celebrating the important things. Make sure you acknowledge each of your employees' birthdays, or if somebody is getting married, or if they've had a death in the family. Just start being a little bit more aware. Today, for example, we celebrated an employee's birthday. I baked her a carrot cake, and she knew I spent half the day Sunday making her that cake. It means a lot to me that my team knows how much they mean to me.

Another small thing you can do to foster connection: On Monday mornings, we go around the office for 10 to 15 minutes and talk about the weekend and team calendar. Where did you go? What was your favorite thing that you did? It opens everybody up and calms people down.

We try to do a team-building event at least once a year. A couple of years ago, we did one of those ropes courses and had dinner afterward. We've also gone apple picking and then out to lunch. It's important to get together, listen to each other and have a little fun every now and again.

With the team I have now, I feel like I have four partners. Everybody has their own job to do, but I know that they all have my back. That's such a great place to be in, because I can't do this by myself anymore. It doesn't work without great people. Sure, there are still days that being the boss is challenging—and when you have the wrong employees, those days feel like years. But when you have the right people, you're in a great place.

