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Sandra Wiley • Feb. 13, 2023



Do you want your team to feel empowered and motivated? It starts with establishing a solid foundation of an employee-first culture. When employees feel valued, respected, and supported by leadership, your firm builds and sustains trust in its talent. This kind of atmosphere leads to increased job satisfaction for every team member in the firm and has far-reaching impacts on productivity, morale and collaboration—all key elements that drive success.

What is an employee-first culture and why is it

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Greater ability to attract top talent

Attracting talent in accounting firms has grown increasingly difficult in recent years. While other industries are seeing a softening of the talent landscape due to recessionary concerns, this isn't necessarily the case for accounting firms.

Part of the issue stems from a simple supply and demand problem. Demand for accounting majors remains strong, but many college students are choosing other majors, and fewer accounting majors are interested in public accounting or pursuing a CPA license.

The accounting profession is suffering from an image problem. Young people, by and large, aren't interested in taking a fifth year of college education to sit for the CPA exam or working brutal hours to rise through the ranks.

This issue isn't going away any time soon, but firms that demonstrate an employee-first culture that values and respects individuals will have an advantage when it comes to recruiting the best people for the job.

Greater employee engagement and innovation

When employees feel heard and respected, they are more likely to take ownership of their work and contribute in a meaningful way. By creating an environment where employees feel comfortable giving feedback and voicing their opinions, you empower them to become leaders. This grants team members greater autonomy in decision-making, which is necessary for innovation and out-of-the-box solutions.

Reduced employee turnover

An employee-first culture is one of the most effective ways to reduce employee

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How can you create a culture that puts employees first?

Creating a culture that puts employees first can be daunting, but the following steps can help you get started.

Promote two-way communication

The old-school way of organizing an accounting firm was hierarchal. Partners made the decisions, and the staff followed suit. In an employee-first culture, communication is a two-way street, and leaders take the time to meet with employees regularly, hear their concerns, and take action on recommendations.

Focus on creating opportunities for employees to contribute to the firm in a meaningful way. This can include inviting them to participate in decision-making processes and giving them a chance to take on more responsibility in their roles. Be open to feedback from your team and take the time to develop relationships with each individual. People feel valued and appreciated when you continually look for ways to create meaningful opportunities for everyone to contribute.

Provide mentorship, coaching, learning and development

Providing mentorship and coaching to employees is critical to creating an employee-first culture. Mentorship and coaching can help further develop employees' skills and knowledge. This type of support from leaders can give employees the confidence to take on greater responsibilities within the firm.

Learning and development programs are also essential for any firm looking to create an employee-first culture. These programs can help employees stay up-to-date on the

latest industry trends, advance their technical knowledge, and develop core success

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recognized for their hard work, they feel more valued and motivated to continue striving for excellence.

In fact, according to Quantum Workplace, organizations with formal recognition programs have **30% less voluntary turnover** than organizations without these programs, and they're 12 times more likely to have strong business outcomes.

Prioritize well-being

It's impossible to overstate the importance of prioritizing employee well-being. Before the pandemic, many firms paid lip service to employee well-being, but few really viewed it as a top priority. That had to change when workloads and pandemic stress converged, creating a burnout crisis in the profession.

There's no one-size-fits-all answer to improving the overall health and wellness of your team, but some ideas include:

- **Listening to your employees.** They know where employee health and wellness gaps exist and can help you identify improvements.
- **Encouraging (and paying for) physical wellness.** It's easy to say you care about employees' physical health, but expecting them to work 60, 70 or more hours per week tells a different story. Ensure employees have time to take care of their health and consider offering stipends to help pay for a gym membership or fitness classes, purchase workout equipment, or furnish a healthier workspace.
- **De-stigmatizing mental health.** Make sure your employee benefits package includes mental health benefits. Help employees feel comfortable seeking help when needed.
- **Encourage breaks and vacations.** When employees can step away from their work and recharge, they return to their roles feeling energized and more productive.

- **Supporting flexible work arrangements.** Giving people flexibility in when and

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