

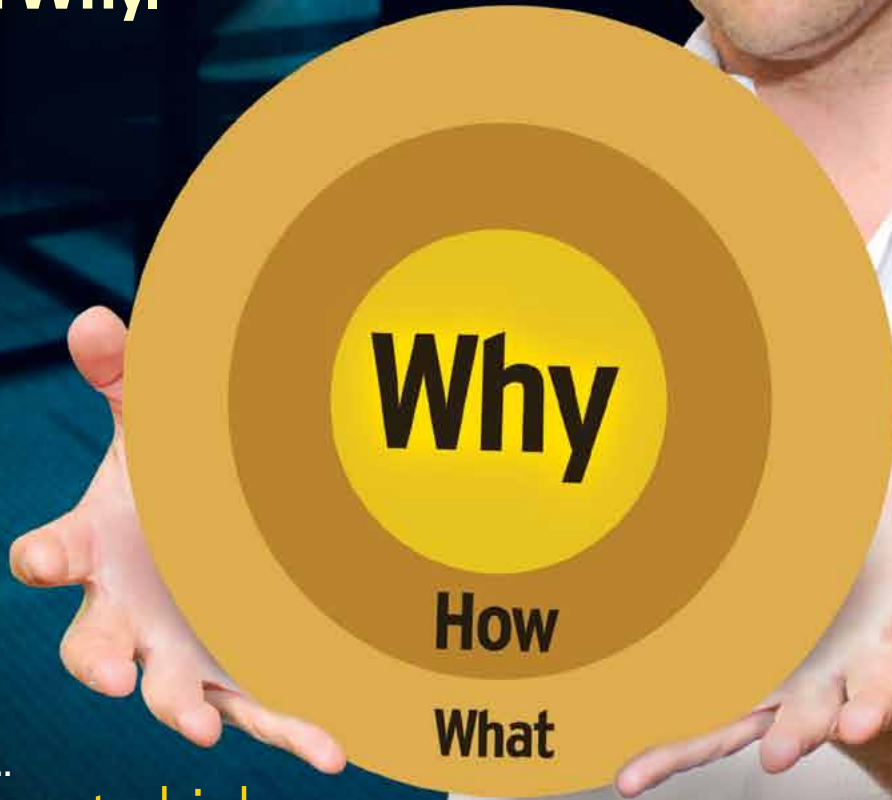
Special Leadership Edition

# YOUR WORKPLACE



Inspired People. Outstanding Results.

Learn what makes people fantastic and perform at their best. Simon says, "Start with Why."



**Simon Sinek and his Golden Circle**

INSIDE...

**5** Keys to high performing teams

**4** Tips to build a thriving culture

**3** Complaints about apathetic bosses

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With shared purpose, Points International leaders embraced their accountability not just for what their functional groups would achieve, but also for building a company that would thrive. Their shared vision was to create an organization that would deliver more than they had ever conceived and without the politics they had experienced in their previous corporate lives.





# Building a Culture That Thrives

How Points International created an amazing culture of success

» SHERRILL BURNS

Imagine a company that pays for tickets to a Blue Jays game provided that you could gather at least ten work colleagues who would like to share the experience with you. In fact, if ten or more people want to do anything socially together, like paint ball or a movie, the company pays for it. And in the summer, during sandal season, imagine an executive sending an e-mail asking who was interested in having a manicure and pedicure together, then fifteen people meet on a sunny Friday afternoon on the company's rooftop for their mani-pedi's and refreshments while getting to know each other better.

## WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

Like many organizations today, Points International, headquartered in Toronto, needs to attract and retain the best talent. As a global leader in loyalty program management, providing eCommerce and technology solutions to leading loyalty brands, its growth has been fueled by the cultural strengths it has developed since its dot.com days, such as focus, innovation and collaboration. As one of the few survivors of the dot.com era in Canada, its CEO Rob MacLean is frequently asked why Points International survived and other firms did not. The answer to this question reveals some of the key ways leaders can build a thriving culture that supports strategic direction.

## #1: IT STARTS WITH PURPOSE

At start-up, the leaders at Points knew each other well and were willing to work hard to create something together. They knew their 'why' as Simon Sinek explains in his book, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Action*. With shared purpose, they embraced their accountability

as leaders, not just for what their functional groups would achieve, but also for building a company that would thrive. Their shared vision was to create an organization that would deliver more than they had ever conceived and without the politics they had experienced in their previous corporate lives.

Every leader plays a team leadership role and needs to focus on team plans and performance. But every leader also plays an organizational leadership role to link hearts and minds to the core purpose of the organization and to what is important and meaningful to members of the team. Linking to the purpose of the organization, where passion and engagement can be unleashed, is the starting point for shaping a vibrant culture.

## #2: BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT

In 2000, when MacLean and his team looked into the future, they made an unofficial pact and created the mantra: work hard, and be blunt and honest. Bureaucracy and political behaviours would be avoided at all costs. With these clear principles, the company became "a place of hard chargers where you need a thick skin for the full contact feedback you get around here," says MacLean. Ideas and decisions are debated openly and with passion but decisions, once made, are implemented with urgency. Although growing larger, Points International has maintained its focus on the culture it created 12 years ago.

Every leader has the opportunity everyday to be clear about what's important, right and accepted. Maclean and his team continue to be role models for their mantra.

**Values:** Organizations that care about culture make their beliefs clear by identifying a set of values that



# #1: IT STARTS WITH PURPOSE

## #2: BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT

will guide behaviour and decision making. They consistently make decisions based on those values and they consistently recognize and reward those who demonstrate them.

Patrick Lencioni in his article, *Make Your Values Mean Something*, presents a case for thinking about organizational values in four ways. First, describe a set of 'core' values that are deeply engrained and will guide all of your organization's actions and serve as cultural cornerstones. Second, identify 'aspirational' values or those that your organization needs to succeed in the future, but currently lacks. Third, validate whether the espoused values are 'permission to play' values that are simply minimum behaviours and social standards for employees. Fourth, spot 'accidental' values or those that have evolved spontaneously without being cultivated and have taken hold over time.

Being clear about the values and principles important for today and tomorrow creates a cultural framework that people, up, down and across the organization, can align their behaviours with.

### #3: IT'S ABOUT EVERYDAY PRACTICES

Organizational culture is embedded in the beliefs and social norms of the workplace. It is embedded in the stories about who are heroes and who are not. It is embedded in the symbols, jargon and the routines of the institution. It is embedded in the structures and systems that middle managers own and it radiates out from the behaviours and practices that executives,

like Rob MacLean, demonstrate every day. Importantly, culture is embedded in day-to-day practices and this is an area where any leader and his or her group can make a difference.

**Social Practices:** MacLean knew at the start-up of the company that building camaraderie in different ways and learning to take one self less seriously was important. Enhancing relationships and getting to know each others' strengths and interests would be key to enhancing candour, collaboration and innovation. He made a habit of taking everyone to the movies every second Friday so people could 'catch a breath' and connect with each other. However, by listening to employees over time he learned that this practice was not working for everyone. More flexible approaches for engaging groups of employees that would build relationships, respect and trust was needed. While the company picnic is still a tradition, more self-directed, high-engagement social events bring camaraderie, fun and excitement into the workplace at no more cost than prior approaches.

**Managing Practices:** Every manager has within his or her control a myriad of routines that can be shaped more intentionally to create the kind of culture that is desired in his or her area. Managers influence the way feedback is given, the way work is planned and the way their own group makes decisions. For example, compare a meeting led by a manager without an agenda, that starts late, with little tracking of



commitments with a meeting led by a manager where the meeting starts on time, the agenda is mostly generated by staff and commitments are fiercely debated and tracked. The latter leader is shaping a culture of focus and engagement within his or her team.

**Operating Practices:** Points International's success is based on bringing its client organization the kind of solutions they want and need with speed and ingenuity. When using a cascade approach to software development wasn't working, the company chose to shift to agile software development, a very different approach demanding increased transparency, communication and collaboration. The shift to agile development practices was not easy, with significant change-over of staff, yet this shift has now strengthened the desired culture. New routines have been installed such as stand-up meetings at 10:00am for the development teams. This has now been extended to the executive team who have their own stand-up meeting every Monday and Thursday.

**Search Practices:** Search practices are the approaches that leaders use to seek out and identify ways to enhance the current way of doing things. This includes the way that leaders help groups learn from their experiences with practices like 'after action reviews', 'post mortems' and 'process improvement work'. Asking questions such as, 'what went well' and 'what needs to change' creates workplaces that are agile and sustainable organizations.

#### #4 MAKE THE TOUGH CALLS

When the cultural framework for an organization is defined and there is conviction about core values and the desired culture, intolerable or inappropriate behaviours can be addressed. Leaders who build vibrant cultures take action to give feedback and coach and, if necessary, terminate those who violate the foundation of the organization's performance – its culture. These can be tough calls, particularly when the performance of the employee is otherwise solid. However these leaders know that the collateral damage from misaligned behaviours will sap the vitality of the organization and drain leader credibility unless addressed.

#### CULTURE BY DESIGN

Every day a leader has the choice to allow the culture of their group and their organization to evolve through default or to shape it intentionally by design. Make every minute contribute to building a culture that thrives by finding ways to:

- ▶ talk about shared purpose
- ▶ establish your culture framework
- ▶ align your practices, and
- ▶ make tough choices.

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## #3: IT'S ABOUT EVERYDAY PRACTICES

### #4 MAKE THE TOUGH CALLS