

FIRST PLACE | LARGE COMPANY

CORPORATE SYNERGIES GROUP

ADAM STONE | SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL



Management solicits input from employees at every step

Go ahead. Gripe. Eric Raymond won't mind. In fact, he'll probably thank you for it.

"We have an everyday philosophy of having all my employees say: "What the heck? Why are we doing things this way?" Raymond said. "Some people fire people because they complain. We fire people if they don't complain. I want every employee every day to think: "How can we do things better?"



Raymond has made this strategy pay. As CEO of Corporate Synergies Group Inc., a health plan consulting company in Mt. Laurel, NJ, he has put together a tightly bound team of some 200 employees ready and willing to pull together.

Founded three years ago by Raymond and several partners, Corporate Synergies helps to control the cost of employee benefits for firms of 100 or more employees. It's an ever-changing field, with a regulatory landscape that evolves perpetually, along with the constantly changing cost and structure of benefits products.

Raymond counts on his employees at all levels to help the company navigate these shifting sands. By soliciting their input, he not only creates job satisfaction, but also helps the company stay on course.

"Periodically we send out forms asking people what are their top five or ten ideas on how we can do things better," he said. In addition to these formal solicitations, "we also have weekly meetings in almost every department where we are sharing ideas like that."

People take the invitation seriously, "I get e-mails all the time saying, "Why don't we do it this way?" Raymond said. In most cases management will share feedback with those who offer ideas, and in many cases the new ideas will be implemented. "We do try to act on every good suggestion."

Those who make suggestions know that, if their ideas are adopted, they will almost surely be given the tools they need to put those ideas into action.

"If I need something, if there are ever resources that I need in order to get something done and accomplish something for our clients, I know that I am going to get it," said Andrew Bloom, senior vice president of operations. "If it makes sense and is practical for the business, then we get it."

This participatory spirit in turn helps build a cohesive team. The best thing about Corporate Synergies? "It's the people here," Bloom said. "I just can't say enough good things. Everyone works in a team environment and is willing to help each other out."

As Raymond ponders the company's success in building a base of happy employees, he has to laugh a little. He may have reached a high bar, he said, but frankly it wasn't hard to out-do his prior experiences.

"We started the company because our original people worked for banks that had gotten into the benefits business. Now, it's pretty easy to be a better place to work for than a bank," he said. "Most of what they are concerned about is cost control. They are very rigid environments and that doesn't make the insurance department in a bank a great place to work."

(New recruiting motto? "Well, it beats working in a bank.")

Kidding aside, Raymond and his top management team have put a lot of thought and energy into building a place where people are happy to come to work.

In large measure this means making sure people are prepared to do whatever task is asked of them. An in-house education infrastructure offers training for every aspect of every job, something Raymond would like the rest of the industry to understand. "We have a culture that is hard for an outside firm to see and understand. But when you are part of it, it is easy to impart that," he said.

To that end, Corporate Synergies parlays its expertise, reaching beyond its walls to train hundreds of people from HR departments throughout the industry.

In addition to training, the company also has in place a system of monitoring that both ensures a quality product and also offers employees the opportunity to grow.

Rather like Six Sigma, the company's "operational excellence" program incorporates within the business process a methodical approach to evaluating workflow and quality and to monitoring improvements. All this happens under the guidance of a director of operational excellence.

To close the loop, the findings of the operational excellence evaluations are channeled back to diverse employee teams, who then are tasked with implementing changes. "We want to provide constant mental challenges," Raymond said. "Most people want to feel like they can learn and contribute."

It's part of Raymond's larger philosophy of what it takes to make a business thrive. "I believe that to be successful you have to have great people, and to have great people you have to give each person the ability to self-actualize their potential."

Outside of the office, those challenges often come in the form of involvement with local charitable organizations including Goodwill Industries International and Habitat for Humanity. Last year the company raised \$200,000 for charity, and this year it has already given \$75,000 in support of finding a cure for ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Raymond said this kind of involvement speaks to employees in a way that goes beyond the need to just bring home a paycheck. "Part of being an employee is being a person. People want to give, and they want to work for a company that feels that same, a place that isn't just a business but also gives back to the community," he said.

People also want to have some fun and Raymond is ready to provide that, too, with picnics and holiday parties. The company also tries to respond to diverse personal needs, as for instance with a quiet room for lactating moms. Sometimes free pretzels and popcorn are available in the office, as well as trivia contests.

"We constantly are doing fun things like that," said Raymond, who believes that taken together, all these efforts big and small help make Corporate Synergies Group a great place to work.

