



Why Culture Matters

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By Lynn Hood
Healthcare Writer

“Corporate culture” has such a touchy-feely connotation that many business owners instinctively back off or glaze over when it’s raised. With physicians, who are accustomed to making decisions based on hard evidence, the reaction can be even more vehemently negative. After all, it doesn’t count since you can’t measure it, right? Well, sometimes the measurements require a deeper look.

There are solid financial measurements that show strong corporate cultures benefit everyone – employees, customers, management and even the all-important bottom line. Simply look at the financial performance of the companies perennially included in *The 100 Best Companies to Work For in America* for confirmation. Stock market data confirms that the publicly traded 100 Best Companies consistently outperform major stock indices.

Culture matters. In their book, *The Ownership Quotient*, Harvard Business School professors Jim Heskett and Earl Sasser, and coauthor Joe Wheeler, build a case for strong, adaptive cultures that foster innovation, productivity and a sense of ownership among employees and customers.

Articles on culture tend to center on technology and retail companies such as Google, Apple, Southwest Airlines, Nordstrom and Zappos. These companies have established powerful brands and laudable working environments. So why is it such a struggle to find examples of great team culture within healthcare? After all, this is an industry focused on people!

At a recent conference, I learned of an Atlanta company taking the GI industry by storm. **EndoChoice** has created a new business model that provides comprehensive, innovative products and services for the GI professional, but the company has become as well known for its culture as its revolutionary approach.

Green Frogs and CHIE

It’s easy to see why EndoChoice’s culture is creating an industry buzz when you meet with members of the management team. During the company’s formation, the team proactively formulated a culture around the homemade acronym of “CHIE.” CHIE, which rhymes with tea, is an acronym for **C**lever, **H**igh quality, **I**nnovative and **E**xceeding expectations. It summarizes company employees’ commitment to surpass the expectations of their customers AND their colleagues.

CHIE stands for:

- **Clever**
- **High quality**
- **Innovative**
- **Exceeding expectations**

One sees sparks of excitement when talking with EndoChoice CEO Mark Gilreath about CHIE and how it defines the company’s culture.

“At EndoChoice we’re process driven and consistently use robust metrics, but our success is driven by talented people,” says Gilreath. “We believe ‘above and beyond’ actions must be celebrated, and celebrated often. During our early days, we didn’t have much money for employee recognition, yet our employees were going above and beyond for customers – and for each other – on a regular basis.

Frankly, some of our employee actions were simply heroic. We began watching for these examples of CHIE, and developed a nomination process for CHIE awards.”

Each month the management team reviews all nominations. The company has regular all-hands meetings, and those selected for the CHIE award receive recognition with loud clapping and cheers. They also receive a letter from the CEO that outlines their outstanding contribution, a small gift certificate and a green plastic frog as a token of appreciation.

Gilreath says, “The bar has been set very high to receive a coveted green frog, and walking through our offices, you may spot one of the 25 that have been awarded to date. It’s amazing that this small token of recognition has become an internal badge of honor. And when we share the CHIE stories that earned the award, each story further strengthens our culture and ensures continued high performance.”

A coveted plastic EndoChoice CHIE green frog



Now the company works to operationalize CHIE and to make it practical in the everyday routine. For example, it’s CHIE to answer the phone in three rings or less and to provide same-day shipping for orders. It’s CHIE to develop superior products at the lowest cost. It’s CHIE to address some of the biggest challenges GI labs face by developing products that improve both efficiency and compliance. And in the EndoChoice pathology lab, it’s CHIE for the EndoChoice Pathologist to call the GI physician each time the diagnostic result is cancer.

Today, CHIE has become a part of EndoChoice’s corporate DNA and apparently it resonates with GI professionals. In three short years the company has become a leader in the GI industry with more than 1,500 customers in 28 countries, and it was recently named by *Inc. Magazine* as one of the fastest growing companies in America.

The benefits are clear. As of January 1, 2011 – completing their first three years in business – employee turnover in the Company was less than 5%, while the industry averages closer to 20% per year. So the CHIE culture contributes to retention of great employees, employee engagement and productivity in a measurable way.

To get a better sense of the culture at EndoChoice, take a look at the CHIE video and what unrehearsed EndoChoice employees have to say: www.endochoice.com/ECTV/Testimonials/CHIE-Video.

An Eye Opener

Gilreath says that in the past year, numerous GI groups have inquired about the CHIE culture at EndoChoice and how it might be implemented within a GI endoscopy lab setting, whether an Ambulatory Surgery Center (ASC) or at a hospital. Is it possible? Would it be practical?

With these interesting questions in mind, the EndoChoice team took advantage of a confluence of events that created a great opportunity. The American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) held a conference on *Fostering Innovation & Technology Conference* in Palo Alto in March this year. Since members of the EndoChoice team were attending, they arranged a private tour of the Googleplex (Google’s headquarters) for a group of thought-leading GI physicians.

A group of 18 GI professionals arrived at Googleplex where, even on a Friday night, there were still employees working onsite. For a group of highly trained specialty physicians, it was a fascinating tour. The culture, expectations and openness represented a dramatically different environment than the everyday experience of their colleagues in a GI lab.

Google offers a host of perks to enhance retention and support productivity, including free breakfast, lunch and dinner, haircuts, laundry, child care, chiropractors, and five onsite physicians (although no gastroenterologists yet). Employees can bring their dogs to work, work out, take a swim or decompress in a capsule impermeable to sound and light. There's even an organic garden and about 20 micro-kitchens spread throughout the campus.



The engineers rule at Google. They have tremendous flexibility, but they don't accept change without data. And though it's a data-driven organization – much like a medical practice – the importance Google places on an unquantifiable attribute like culture has resulted in tremendous success.

Feedback from the group of physicians was eye-opening (although almost universally their first question was how to apply for the job as an on-site physician at Google!).

A Strong Culture of Patient-Focused Care – Dr. John Allen

Dr. John Allen, from Minneapolis, MN, is part of the largest private GI practice group in the U.S. He agrees with Google on the open workplace, and already has that at Minnesota Gastroenterology. “I was struck by the open workplace and emphasis on personal interaction. Years ago we did away with private MD offices and grouped our providers together with shared offices to increase interactions. This has made a huge difference in discussions about patient care.”

Teamwork is critical in Dr. Allen's practice: “We have a very, very strong culture of group practice, patient-focused care. We de-emphasize individual providers and instead focus on working together to maximize both the practice success and patient experience. We like to say that Minnesota Gastroenterology physicians are ‘employees by day and owners by night.’”

“We did away with private MD offices and grouped our providers together with shared offices to increase interactions.”

Dr. Allen adds, “A culture of patient-focused care dominates discussions and makes everyone accountable for explaining how their actions enhance patient care. All physicians and staff know that if they do their best for patients then they will have total support from the organization. The emphasis on premier care and a shared vision for how we work translates into record low turnover and many people advancing through internal promotions. Many of our most senior managers began with entry-level positions within Minnesota GI.”

Transparency and Metrics – Dr. Louis Korman

Dr. Louis Korman, from Washington, DC, observed that Google's willingness to let everyone have a voice in decision making creates a sense of ownership among employees. “The transparency enables the

employees to voice their feelings about the decisions that are being made. Although this can be a 'messy' system it gives everyone a chance to be heard and good ideas can come from anywhere. So even if your ideas are rejected, you have a sense that they will be seriously considered by those responsible for management."

"Metrics are not used as a 'stick' to motivate, but as a tool to create understanding."

The use of metrics was something that stuck Dr. Korman: "Metrics are not used as a 'stick' to motivate, but as a tool to create understanding. I like that approach, and want to provide metrics to our staff so they can measure the practice and what individuals are doing so they can make better choices."

Creating a Strong Team – Dr. Blair Lewis

Dr. Blair Lewis, from New York City, faces the same problems of operating a practice in a metropolitan area. "To me the key is having happy and thus productive employees."

Dr. Lewis says that people want to play a valuable role in an organization, and to be appreciated for their contributions. The feeling of TEAM is very important, and if you can get that sense then the organization overall will benefit tremendously. Employees will go that extra yard, and the customers or patients recognize that. CHIE is about feeling wanted, needed and appreciated; enjoying the work; and translating that experience to the customer."

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Collaboration at the Heart of Culture – Dr. Sumner Bell

For **Dr. Sumner Bell**, in Norfolk, VA, strong collaboration and communication is at the heart of a successful practice. "Collaborative physician and non-physician behavior is apparent in the care of patients, as well as group management and planning for the future. Strong interpersonal relationships foster deep respect for one another and allow for good discussions of different points of view and allow for consensus development. While some might find this approach slow and tedious, the results are impressive and assure a powerful cohesive practice."

He was particularly interested in Google's emphasis on collaboration: "I am fascinated by the Google culture that supports innovation by having people work in an open atmosphere that fosters collaborative creativity. The company will even manage mundane issues of transportation to and from work. The opportunities for creative thinking are maximized and not burdened by the minutia of life."

At his practice, Dr. Bell encourages collaborative participation in problem-solving to gain new perspectives: "Clinical physicians have a tendency to be rigid and dogmatic in their views, but its caused less by large egos than by long established practice patterns incurred by many years of training. It is extremely important to maximize more structured and unstructured opportunities for its members to meet, so a richer conversation can occur. All employees and practice members can be encouraged to identify problems and solutions."

Good Practice Culture Worth the Investment – Dr. Daniel DeMarco

For **Dr. Daniel DeMarco**, in Dallas, TX, the Googleplex reminded him more of a campus than a business workplace. The Medical Director of Endoscopy of Baylor University Medical Center, Dr. DeMarco said, “The culture of education and trying new things, as well as never being satisfied with the status quo, can most definitely be applied to my practice. I was most impressed with the Google workplace culture, and I wish our culture could be more like it.”

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Dr. DeMarco noted that a good practice culture favorably affects morale, productivity, patient satisfaction and the bottom line. “Well worth the investment!” he adds.

“Most importantly we emphasize that patient welfare is of paramount importance. But it’s a struggle to maintain a good practice culture when we’re dealing with decreasing reimbursement and rising overhead.”

The Importance of Communications – Dr. Joel Brill

For **Dr. Joel Brill**, from Phoenix, AZ, the trip to Google emphasized the importance of open communications. “The open workplace is designed for learning, interaction and sharing of knowledge. It makes one think whether we are communicating information to all of our staff and could it spark their interest in helping the GI service do a better job.”

Dr. Brill noted that Google’s emphasis on transparency of data and sharing the projects you are working on creates a collaborative environment that leads to identifying ways in which the practice can find opportunities to operate at a better level. For example, Google has equipped buses throughout the San Francisco bay area with high-speed wireless. This improves workers quality of life while also fostering productivity. “I believe that ‘just because that’s the way we’ve always done it’ doesn’t mean it’s the best way to accomplish a task or provide a service. Good listeners can translate that into opportunities for improvement, creating a culture of high performance.”

“If you provide people with the tools to do a great job, they will exceed your expectations,” Dr. Brill said when asked about the impact of culture in an ASC.

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Five Ways to Improve Your Medical Specialty Culture

In reflecting on the benefits of the Google visit, Gilreath is reminded of one of his favorite quotes from Oliver Wendell Holmes:

"Man's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions."

Based on the best practices from Google, EndoChoice and the physicians, here are a few building blocks that may be useful to create an engaging culture within your medical practice:

- 1) **Talent** – hire the best people and treat them like you want to be treated.
- 2) **Metrics** – develop a set of key metrics which are maintained to monitor progress.
- 3) **Communicate** – discuss the metrics openly and often among all members of your team. Transparency is the key.
- 4) **Collaborate** – everyone has good ideas, and bringing in fresh viewpoints can yield new insights.
- 5) **Celebrate** – celebrate milestones and recognize individual and team achievements.

Every physician I spoke with agreed that the true heart of their practice is the patient, and the practice should operate accordingly. Creating a strong clinical practice takes persistence and perseverance. Think of it like a houseplant: nurture it and it will grow. And that's good CHIE!

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