

Company Culture Clubs are a Sleeper



By Gerald R. Wagner, PhD.

I was once an antique collector and dealer. We had the term “sleeper” for items we thought were of high value but not yet noticed. That word also applies to Company Culture Clubs.

Within company “Culture Clubs” are “cousins” of Culture Ambassadors Chapters¹ but they operate very differently. Culture Ambassadors Chapters are about employee activities external to the company - *external* networking with like minded people and learning about cultures in host company’s. Culture Clubs are about employees identifying, researching, planning, and implementing culture projects *internal* to the company. Clubs are action oriented and operate from the inside out which is the right way to support culture changes. The ROI on such these clubs can be huge because there is typically no money investment. And as growing numbers of people hear stories like the ones below, more Company Culture Clubs are sure to form.

About six years ago “Wellbeing” became a hot topic when Gallup published their Wellbeing book². I jumped on the band wagon and started an Employee Wellbeing Council at Bellevue University, probably one of the first of its kind. The campus already had a “wellness committee” within HR and the idea of a wellbeing council did cause some territorial issues. That was back when it was still common to see

¹ Academycultureambassadors.com

² <http://www.gallup.com/press/176624/wellbeing-five-essential-elements.aspx>

wellness and wellbeing as one of the same. Today the company has a wellness committee and it is a natural path for them to become a part of a broader Culture Club.

The Wellbeing Council (WBC) at *Bellevue University*³ in Bellevue, Nebraska has come a long way since those early days. The group has two co-chairs with sub groups that focus on Financial, Physical, and Social wellbeing, and the council focuses on philanthropy.

During 2016 there was a reorganization in the University and the WBC came under the executive sponsorship of the Chief Operating Officer. This level of executive sponsorship allowed the WBC to continue its core mission to build a sense of community through employee engagement and focus on becoming one of the “Best Places to Work” within the region.

At that time the University created a legal charter that outlines the WBC’s purpose and mission, and the organization became a part of the Higher Learning Commissions periodic reviews.

The University instituted a wellness program, Simply Well⁴ to aid the employees in achieving better health which would in turn lower healthcare costs. The WBC works with Human Resources to present fun challenges so employees can accumulate points to help them lower their premiums.

The Culture Club at *Firespring*⁵ in *Lincoln, Nebraska* began when the company was formed to insure the Founders’ vision would be accomplished. The entire leadership team supports the Culture Club and brings issues to the club and asks for their help in finding solutions.

As CEO Jay Wilkerson says: “the Firespring life is to add value to the lives of our clients, side by side with people we love; be compensated appropriately; and have time for other passions.”

The Club has 12 members with two year terms and there are elections. The company’s Wellness team is a subcommittee of the Club and other subcommittees are formed for short term events. The Club works with the HR team on benefits and arranging employee activities during and after work.

Firespring has an online system for employees to suggest ideas they think are worthy for leadership consideration. If issues are culture related or something the Culture Club can help with, the Club steps in. People also have the ability to talk to any of the Club’s elected representatives about issues they would like to address. This input is discussed during Club meetings and escalated to the leadership team or other action as needed.

The company is a B corporation⁶ with a commitment of giving back to the community. Suggesting worthy opportunities for employees to donate time and talent are important to the Club’s work.

In late 2016, Polly Thomas became the President of the CBIZ Employee Services Organization.⁷ From the beginning, she believed in the power of culture, and one of her immediate action items was to create a Culture Committee. Polly formalized the committee and Caitlin Waters became Chair of what was

³ <http://www.bellevue.edu/>

⁴ <https://secure.simplywell.com/view/public/index.xhtml>

⁵ <https://www.firespring.com/>

⁶ <https://www.bcorporation.net/>

⁷ <https://www.cbiz.com/>

renamed the Culture Club. The purpose was to provide an open forum to share ideas and strategies for the local division to carry out corporate's mission and vision.

Fifteen employees volunteered to join the group and put together a cohesive business plan that included a year-long calendar with a budget. Since they had leadership buy-in early, they knew they could dream big but they had to manage their financial resources.

The Club took a thoughtful approach to a business plan that was research-based and surveyed the entire division to gather input for project ideas. They divided their plan based on coordinating and organizing group activities that promote and encourage 1) team building (internal and external) 2) community involvement and 3) celebrating division successes. They created four sub-committees (team building was broken into two sub-committees: internal and external) that were accountable to deliver on those areas. The group put together a flexible calendar with milestones. One example was to have a team building event outside of the office at least once a quarter. There was also room for changes as new ideas came up. For example, the internal team building event came up with a fantastic campaign to promote people to get on their bikes during the Tour de France.

The Club meets every month, but the ideas are never contained to that time period or even just to the Club. There is an email address where anyone can email ideas, suggestions and feedback. It's completely normal for in a client meeting and someone say, "You know what Culture Club should do next...?" Employees and the Club love that because it means the initiative is growing organically.

If you have a club or know of others, I would love to know. I am thinking about holding two hour workshops in cities for employees interested in starting a Company Culture Club. I also have a document with guidelines for getting started.