

BUILDING A BETTER ECC

Use Psychology 101 to create an ECC culture that attracts and retains 9-1-1 professionals.

By Dana Armstrong

“If you build it, they will come.”

Many of us have heard the line from the 1989 movie, “Field of Dreams” (which is actually, “If you build it, *he* will come.”).¹ This quote, whispered in the film to main character Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) was about building a baseball field to realize his dreams. But the concept that if you create something of value that most people need or want, they will come to you can be applied to just about anything in our lives, even our emergency communications centers (ECCs).

In this time of staffing challenges, one of the primary ways to attract people to our ECCs is by building a positive culture. To do that, we need to understand what people need or want. Getting down to basics is a good place to start. Let’s check out Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The bottom tier is about physiological needs (food, shelter, clothing).² Those are the most basic and we hope that our employees and the ones we want to attract already have those things. We want to focus on the next four tiers: safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

The second rung on the hierarchy is the need for safety and security which includes overall health.³ For ECCs, at a minimum we should be focusing on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of our public safety communicators and staff.

The next rung focuses on love and belonging, which includes a sense of connection.⁴ For

ECCs, this could be building a cohesive team, but in this line of work it should go beyond that. We need to feel connected to our work, our coworkers and to the community we serve.

The fourth rung is about self-esteem and focuses on confidence, achievement and respect of others.⁵ We need to provide our employees with the tools they need to be confident in their roles, to achieve success (which could look different for each person — not everyone wants to climb the ladder) and develop an atmosphere of respect.

The last tier is self-actualization, which focuses on morality, creativity, acceptance, experience of purpose and meaning.⁶ We could safely say that most people in public safety strive for morality, purpose and meaning in their work. If our ECCs can help them achieve at least the last two, we may be on to something.

Piggybacking on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, or perhaps simply putting it into practice, the Ritz-Carlton hotels are world-renowned for their top-notch customer service to clients. ECCs serve people every day, both in the field and within their own agencies. We are essentially providing customer service on a daily basis. The Ritz understands that it is their employees who make the positive difference for their clients. “The foundation of driving customer engagement is having engaged employees. Employee mindset has everything to do with whether your business survives or thrives, because engaged employees create engaged and loyal customers.”⁷ The Ritz believes success is built from within.

If your agency is experiencing high turnover, complaints, a lack of morale or any of the above, it’s likely you need to rethink your culture. We know that building a good culture within our ECCs is essential for attracting and retaining good people, but where do we start?

Here are five things to begin focusing on to start turning the tide for the better:

I. MEET THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

According to Saul McLeod, Ph.D., editor-in-chief for *Simply Psychology*, people need order and predictability, freedom from fear, health and well-being.⁸ For ECCs, this could mean re-evaluating your processes. Look at how your agency deals with employees from the hiring process to the termination or exit of the employee. Eliminating retaliatory measures after receiving feedback, suggestions or questions from employees also helps build a positive culture. Promoting mental and physical health is important to let employees know you care about them.

People want to feel like they belong. In this industry, it’s easy to become jaded and burned out. Giving employees chances to rediscover their “why” and help them to connect positively with their coworkers and staff goes a long way toward building positive culture.

People also want to be valued. It’s important for ECCs to build this into their culture. Recognize people on a consistent basis for doing good work and going above and beyond. Help them succeed and grow by



offering them development plans that focus on goals they want to achieve personally and professionally. Then check in with them to see how they're doing.

Finally, allowing our employees to go beyond the job itself and be creative could be another avenue to build a positive culture. The Cobb County (Georgia) ECC created a "G.R.O.W." (growth, restoration, oneness, wellness) garden where employees volunteer to plant flowers, shrubbery and flowering trees and maintain it so other employees can enjoy the quiet space to decompress. It's therapeutic, philanthropic and creative.

2. DEFINE YOUR VALUES, LIVE BY THEM DAILY AND HOLD PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE

Deciding what your values are is a first step to building a positive culture. Do you have a civility policy? If not, perhaps your agency should consider it. Cobb County's civility policy includes integrity, service, pride, teamwork, open communications, innovation, diversity and a positive work environment. The policy is not only displayed on the ECCs walls for everyone to see. It is lived daily and people are held to those standards.

3. BE FLEXIBLE

Do you have a "no hat" policy? Most ECCs do. We want to present a professional image to the public we serve. But can we maintain professionalism while also allowing our employees a bit of freedom (within reason, of course)? Cobb County's ECC director recently allowed the use of hats on "casual day" as long as they abide by the "neat, clean and appropriate for work" standard. Was morale boosted a little just by a simple change like this? You bet because the employees asked for it and the director granted it.

4. FOSTER POSITIVE CONNECTIONS

Whether the connections are between peers, supervisor-subordinate, or the new hire and the director, building a culture of positive connections is essential. Create an environment where people inspire each other, support one another, are compassionate and kind.

According to Emma Seppala, Ph.D., Yale School of Management, and Kim Cameron, Ph.D., professor at the University of Michigan, fostering connections produces "highly desirable results."⁹ People tend to get sick less often, they learn faster and perform better on the job.

5. BE PEOPLE FOCUSED

As a great lady once said, "We are mission focused, but people driven." That lady is our own Cobb County ECC director, Melissa Alterio. What she means is that we truly care about the well-being, happiness, growth and success of the department's employees.

The University of Massachusetts agrees with her. They state that "real culture is rooted in an employee's daily experiences, which in turn shape their beliefs," and "these beliefs inform their actions and actions lead to results."¹⁰

Building a positive culture is not a quick fix, especially if your agency is starting from a low place. It's a journey and a process filled with growing pains, twists and turns. Some employees will balk at the change, some will embrace it. It could take several years to change the tide of the current culture, but in the end, is it worth it? In her final interview before being hired at the Cobb County Department of Emergency Communications, Marquita Boyd answered that question. "Everyone was so welcoming. Even when I took CritiCall," she said, referring to a test given to applicants that assesses 9-1-1 job-related skills. "I knew this was the place I wanted to be just by the environment."

So, yes, it's worth it. Remember, if you build it, they will come. ●

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