

January 23, 2008

Bridging the Cultural Chasm

Highland's Lisa M. Cathie speaks the language of business

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Lisa M. Cathie

When Highland resident Lisa Cathie talks about culture, she's not talking about what gives yogurt its tang. Rather, the founder and president of Optimum Performance, Inc. is referring to the environment, traditions and practices of a particular organization and how culture affects a businesses' bottom line.

The culture of a particular organization can sour over time, when a major shift — either a new CEO comes on board, a company decides to downsize, or a merging of companies (and concurrent clashing of cultures) — takes place.

"I'm a cultural expert," says Cathie. "I focus on a culture within an organization. I make sure that everything in your organization is geared so that you are truly customer-centric," and hence create a stronger bottom line.

"Corporate cultures are formed based on their history and roots, and what the attitudes and beliefs of the founders are," she continues. "To change a culture, it has to be top down, bottom up and inside out."

In her quest to create the best of all possible work environments and customer experience, Cathie recently added the moniker "official vendor for the Disney Institute," to her bag of tricks. The Disney Institute is a place where savvy business people go to learn about how to re-create the magic that is synonymous with the creator of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Cinderella in their own organizations.

What does it mean to be a vendor of the Disney Institute? "The Disney Institute specializes in experiential training," explains Cathie. "It's an experience; where everything comes to life. At Disney, every employee has a role and everything in the Magic Kingdom has a reason for being there. It links the physical environment with the employees, making sure they have the right tools to do their jobs."

Cathie was discovered by the Disney Institute at one of her workshops, "because they observed how I was bring Disney Institute principles to life in the workplace. As a vendor, I not only bring or introduce people to Disney Institute, and I also incorporate their principles in much of the work that I do."

In fact, even before the Disney Institute discovered Cathie, she had developed her copyrighted "Customer Channeling" technique. "It brings the environment, the employees and the customers together," she says. "It's how you are welcomed — I call that 'hosting' — the way you are treated from the time you walk in until you leave."

Observe, then Assess:

As an organizational development consultant, Cathie often goes “undercover,” working at a business as an interim executive to fully understand what a particular corporate culture is and how it does or doesn’t work before stepping in to make changes. The intensive process takes an average time of 18 months from beginning to completion. Her mission? “To increase efficiency, productivity and a better experience for the employee and the customer,” she says. “I provide non-disruptive return. I start with a diagnostic assessment and after the diagnostic assessment, I conduct a vision workshop with the leaders of the organization. We then we build a strategy and bring that strategy to life with tactical implementation and follow-through for sustainability.”

Power to the People (who work for you):

Cathie draws upon nearly a quarter decade of experience in financial services in her role as consultant. Before setting out on her own, she was regional vice president responsible for 200 branches of a bank located in New York and New Jersey. In the course of her duties, she had an epiphany and realized the key to a successful organization was a thorough integration of duties, culture and customer service. “Most employees think they only work for one department; it’s about global perspective,” says Cathie.

It’s also, in a time when many businesses are feeling the effect of an economic downturn, all about a company’s employees. “What I’ve seen in the market is that innovation is becoming flat,” says Cathie. “Price margins are narrow and what it’s boiling down to is the employee. Success is really in the employees’ hands. Employees are an organization’s greatest resource, and companies are just starting to figure that out.”

Her clients include financial institutions, the Culinary Institute of America, Orange Community College, and health care providers. Although she is based in Highland, she travels wherever her clients are located — some are in Texas. While some of her clients are large institutions, others are small, multi-generational family businesses. But don’t feel sorry for her. Cathie is passionate about her work, and humble about her role in transforming the companies she helps. “It’s a lot of fun,” she insists. “The employees get it done, not me. They own it.” And no matter how busy she is with work, she stays grounded with the help of her husband, two children (and two dogs) and a healthy dose of volunteer work. She is also a senior consultant and an adjunct professor for SUNY Orange, where she teaches adult continuing education.

When she says, “It’s all about the people,” you know she means it, and it’s not just a job.

To retain Lisa Cathie’s services, or to learn more about Optimum Performance, Inc., call (914) 522-2225 or visit www.optimumperformanceinc.com.