

Teamwork by Design



PHOTO BY HEIDI SMITH

Lacey engineering firm SCJ Alliance has worked hard to cultivate a company culture where, according to co-founder and president Perry Shea, "every level of our staff can contribute and dialogue."

How South Sound companies are creating effective work groups

By Heidi Smith
Contributing Writer

What makes a great team? Are powerfully effective teams just born, or can companies intentionally create environments in which any team can flourish?

Those were some of the questions that Google's People Operations team was trying to answer in a research study code named Project Aristotle. The results are outlined in a chapter of the recent best-seller "Smarter, Better, Faster: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business." Author Charles Duhigg explains the critical importance of psychological safety as the number one factor that enables teams and the individuals within them to feel comfortable taking risks, genuinely collaborating, and sharing failures along with successes in a push for constant evolution.

At both Lacey's SCJ Alliance, a civil engineering, transportation planning and design firm, and Brightwire Networks, an Olympia-based IT Management Services

company, the leadership teams have consciously created systems and practices to encourage that level of security. Communication plays a key role.

"We work in the gray a lot of the time," says SCJ co-founder and president Perry Shea. "There may not be a prescriptive solution. You can have an environment where one strong personality throws out an opinion at a meeting and everyone feels threatened. But that's not what we do here. Every level of our staff can contribute in a dialogue. When we allow everyone to contribute and brainstorm about future things we want to do with the company, we end up with really effective remedies."

Open communication is equally important at Brightwire. "We wouldn't penalize anyone for sharing an opinion or giving feedback," says co-founder Todd Whitley. "We have a lot of service performance metrics that are converted into ratios. We share those with our team and we want to hear ideas and opinions from everyone. Providing world-class service is ultimately

our key driver for client success."

Even if staff members "should" know an answer, everyone can ask questions, he says. "If you've forgotten something or you simply don't know, ask a question. Don't hide in a corner and be afraid to ask. We want our employees to collaborate."

Company culture at Brightwire wasn't always so optimal. So, in 2014, Whitley and co-founder Gordon Carlisle took note and began an overhaul of everything related to company culture and client services. "We revamped our hiring process and looked into what originally made our company successful both from a client perspective and also as a good place to work."

In hiring, technical expertise, while still important, took a back seat to people skills and being a good fit with other team members. "We actually prefer to hire someone that we can build up and train from an entry level," says Whitley. "We have 40 client networks that are all really different and the challenges of this work are unique."

Shea also looks for qualities other than technical skills. "We want people who know how to engage and listen," he says. "We can teach the technical side, so we look for those traits first."

Within the first three months, Shea does a three-month check-in with new employees. "We check their pulse to see how they're doing, how we can help them be successful and reach their professional development goals," he says. "Their managers or supervisors are checking in all the time."

Both companies use personality assessments to identify the best fit for employees. "All of our staff read a book and take a test to identify their top five strengths," says Shea. "Once we understand how a person is wired, we use that information for how we put teams together, who we put in front of clients, and how we fill different positions in our company. We do a lot of training and investment around personality and communication."

Brightwire also has vendors that provide personality profiling tests. While its employees are required to have excellent troubleshooting and analysis skills, they also have strong support systems in place.

"We want people to have the latitude to be creative with problem solving, but the client has hired us to eliminate disruptions in their day to day service," says Whitley. "After 30 minutes of trying to figure out a solution, we have people check in with a peer or a supervisor and get some guidance. Our rule is to avoid handing off a problem laterally to someone at the same level as you, because that just frustrates cli-

ents. We only escalate up."

The company also works on internal processes and improvements as a team. "Each person gets an assignment where they become the subject area expert to help us build out our operations in areas like software platforms, monitoring systems or client documentation," says Whitley. "They, in turn, train other people in how it works."

Putting so much emphasis on internal

systems has paid off, not only in an improved company culture but in client retention and attraction.

"Since March we've had seven clients renew contracts for longer periods and every one of them said we were doing a fantastic job," says Whitley. "We've put an enormous amount of time into providing a deeper set of services than we had three years ago, and that's led to a significant service improvements for new and existing

clients. We just hired a business development manager. A lot of that is the result of the work we did building the team up and improving services."

Although Shea is a self-confessed analytics fan, SCJ doesn't manage by the numbers. "By managing people effectively and creating an environment where they feel like they're contributing every day, we know we're meeting our metrics," he says. "The numbers are going to be there." **BIZ**



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