



## Today's Topic:

# Family Feelings: General Mills and Synovus

**Guest Speakers:**

Sandy Ohlsson, VP of Human Resources, General Mills  
Marty Grueber, SVP of Team Enhancements, Synovus

**Facilitator:**

Suzanne Vickberg, PhD, Consultant, Great Place to Work® Institute, Inc.

Creating a family atmosphere in the workplace conveys the intention of company leaders to foster strong relationships. In addition to cultivating productive employees who enjoy being with each other, close interpersonal relationships promote healthy morale and a sense that a job can be more than simply where one spends eight hours a day. To explore different perspectives on the idea of being a family at the workplace, Sandy Ohlsson, VP of Human Resources at General Mills, and Marty Grueber, SVP of Team Enhancements at Synovus, joined Suzanne Vickberg of Great Place to Work® Institute in a networking call to discuss the ways in which their respective companies strive to promote a healthy community.

### Family-Friendly Practices

General Mills, a Minneapolis-based food manufacturer with over 100 locations worldwide, strives to create a work environment that enables its 28,000 employees to accommodate the needs of their families outside of work. The company has been recognized on FORTUNE's "100 Best Companies to Work for"® five times since 1998 in addition to being cited in both the 1984 and 1993 editions of *100 Best Companies to Work For*, by Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz. Part of Sandy's role as VP of Human Resources includes responsibility over the employment brand strategy, which includes policies, practices around compensation, benefits, and employee engagement.

General Mills takes a broad view of what being "family-friendly" means. According to Sandy, "We think about it in the context of, how do we encourage our employees to bring their whole selves to the job? [...] It's how we believe we are going to get the maximum productivity and happiness from our employees." Employees are encouraged to think about General Mills as a place that is concerned about them as professionals and individuals. This mentality originated with the most senior-level executives demonstrating behaviors that conveyed this holistic concern and flexibility; many had small children and unapologetically set boundaries in their work lives so as to make room for their families' activities. The model behavior from the senior leaders helped to define for other employees what was expected and encouraged in regard to flexibility for outside commitments. As Sandy noted, "It was the behavior, rather than words, that really defined the culture." To promote this environment, General Mills' unique practices include:

- An on-site daycare facility: Employees are encouraged to keep their children close by, even having lunch with them. Since there is no executive dining room, General Mills' senior leaders are able to interact with the employees and their children in the common eating area.
- Considering impact of promotions: Sandy explained, "Whenever people are being considered for new assignments, one of the key considerations is, 'What impact will this have on your family?'" Options like location alongside the needs of an employee's family go into a decision regarding professional placement.

General Mills faces challenges with over 100 locations in that not every location is large enough to have the same caliber of facilities or events. Leaders in those facilities are encouraged to be creative in how they cultivate a family environment and it is a priority to share best practices throughout the entire company. For example, a best practice might be to invite entire families to events like end-of-year celebrations and informing them of how the business is operating. Sandy points out that “the more our employees’ family members understand our business and what it takes to be successful in our business, the more they will be understanding if, for instance, a production employee has to work overtime on a weekend, or if an employee is being considered for a job in a new location.”

When considering the drawbacks to having a family-friendly environment, Sandy identified two possibilities. She noted that some might regard the environment as paternalistic, since she describes General Mills as a “very nurturing” environment. Also, employees who are single or do not have children may feel that the company caters to families in terms of benefits and policies in a mentality of being overly concerned with family flexibility. She recommends that those seeking to improve their family practices look toward policies that are national in nature, such as a national provider of back-up childcare with whom the company might contract.

Posed with the question of the payoff to the company of making such a large investment in the employees, Sandy would offer: “We believe that it not only helps create a better environment, but it also delivers better business results.” A major way in which General Mills reaps a benefit is the ability to attract and retain the very best talent: Turnover at General Mills is typically approximately half of the industry average, resulting in longer tenure and overall cost savings that might otherwise go toward recruitment and training of new employees.

### Co-Workers as Family Members

Synovus, a financial holdings organization based in Columbus, Georgia, has over 700 locations, including branch banks, and approximately 13,000 team members (a term Synovus uses for all employees). Since 1998, Synovus has been recognized on FORTUNE’s “100 Best Companies to Work for”<sup>®</sup> list, even achieving the top ranking in 1999. As the SVP of Team Enhancements, Marty Grueber is responsible for items that pertain to the quality of life of team members, such as rewards, recognition, and community involvement.

Marty acknowledged that she has had over 30 years of experience with Synovus, where she has worked for her entire professional career, and to describe her experience, she said simply, “This is my family to a great extent. It’s wonderful to know that when I come to work, I have a great family atmosphere.” Synovus defines this atmosphere in a direct manner: *It’s a team and we love each other*. Marty is ready to admit that not every company mentions a loving environment, but a previous CEO always said, “What we want folks to know is that someone gives a darn about them.” Promoting a sense of team such that the team is a family, employees are likely to be forgiving of mistakes and affirming in hard situations, which is what Marty believes makes Synovus successful.

The family feeling at Synovus reflects itself most in the Great Place to Work<sup>®</sup> Trust Index<sup>®</sup> statement, “*We’re all in this together*.” At the same time, senior leaders commit to giving back to the employees who have been so dedicated to the company by affirming, nurturing, and thanking them. Marty emphasized that the culture of Synovus promotes an environment where people are important in what is, in reality, a very large company. The family atmosphere is important to senior leaders because they believe that to do the right thing is to value the work of every individual. Marty explained, “These folks are more than a means to an end. They are important people in your lives...”. When team members enjoy their work and build relationships, they perform at a higher level, which results in satisfied customers. This priority serves both the purpose of an ethical company and a successful company; Synovus believes that “it’s the right thing to do, but it’s the smart thing to do.”

Benefits of a family atmosphere come across in times of change or hardship. Marty points out that family members pull together, and are accepting of change, so these characteristics are fostered in Synovus team members by virtue of their environment. Decision-makers seek consensus, but those who do not necessarily agree are not excluded. In the eyes of senior leaders, individuals' thoughts and values are important to the culture of Synovus and they help construct the family of team members.

As such a tight-knit organization, Synovus faces a particular challenge in regard to delivering difficult feedback to team members during times of evaluation. Employees tend to use the culture as an excuse not to have those critical conversations about behaviors that need to change; however, leaders hope that the family feeling will be extended to a mentality where team members will want to help develop and coach their colleagues, even if the situation is hard temporarily. Ultimately, if team members are able to have these conversations, the team as a whole will benefit from greater growth and development.

## **Conclusion**

Creating a family atmosphere, whether friendly for outside family members or a closely bonded set of team members, takes commitment from senior leadership. As both Sandy and Marty explained, the leaders at General Mills and Synovus hold a family environment high on their list of priorities and create policies and practices to support that effort. In addition to cultivating supported, happy, and productive employees, a welcoming and encouraging environment shows employees that leadership is concerned for them as people in addition to as professionals.



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