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## Today's Topic:

# Fun at CXtec: Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Culture of Camaraderie

### Guest Speakers:

Barbara Ashkin, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, CXtec  
Paula Miller, Director of the Office of the CEO, CXtec

### Facilitator:

Michael Burchell, Senior Consultant, Great Place to Work® Institute, Inc.

**Camaraderie is an essential element to creating a great workplace environment.** CXtec, a New York-based global reseller of new and pre-owned networking cables and voice technologies, was recently recognized by Great Place to Work® Institute for its efforts around creating and encouraging camaraderie. Since 1978, CXtec has helped companies meet their networking goals without blowing budgets while also creating a uniquely inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for its employees. On the list of Best Small and Medium Companies to Work for in America each year since its 2004 inception, CXtec is currently ranked #21 among the best medium-sized companies with approximately 350 employees in three New York locations. From celebrating every traditional holiday and inventing a few of its own to creative incentive programs, sales contests, and annual themes, this technology company makes every day fun as it continuously engages employees and keeps them excited about coming to work. In this networking session, Barbara Ashkin and Paula Miller, both tenured leaders of CXtec, share the secrets of their success and talk with peers about some of the company's best practices.

## A Growing Dedication

Over the last five years, CXtec has experienced significant growth in number of employees as well as in sales. Expanding from 248 to 350 employees, the organization's sales have also grown 47% from \$77 million to a projected \$115 million for 2006. Leaders credit this success to culture, through which they are able to motivate the team and make a business case for doing the right thing. According to Barbara, it all starts with the five core values that define who they are as an organization and how they do business, guiding actions and setting the direction for the future of CXtec:

1. Honesty and Integrity
2. Teamwork
3. Entrepreneurial Spirit
4. Resourcefulness
5. Dedication to Community

When asked what makes CXtec a great workplace, employees' top praises are concerning the sense of family and team they feel at work, and the company's dedication to the community. CXtec partners with nearly 30 different community organizations, all of which are selected by employees in a "bottom-up" approach. As the company grows, the practices change and become more diverse to accommodate new and different employees, but the commitment to teamwork stands strong. According to CXtec, teamwork creates success, and camaraderie creates teamwork.

## The First Day and Everyday

Paula spoke about the specific practices at CXtec that promote the strong culture of teamwork and camaraderie, many of which focus strongly on recognition. Self-characterized as a sales-driven company with a people-driven strategy, they manage internal competition by setting collective goals that everyone can work toward and celebrating everyone's contributions to success. It all starts on the first day; CXtec works very hard to create a welcoming environment for new employees – one where they can comfortably get to know their peers and quickly understand and fit into the culture.

- Each new employee is **greeted in the lobby on the first day by a mentor** and is given a welcome packet, CXtec mug and t-shirt, and a tour of the office. The new employee meets with the mentor at least once a week for 30 to 90 days over coffee to discuss progress and address any cultural questions that have come up, and the new employee and his/her family is invited to join the mentor for the next all-company event.
- In the **“donut cart” program**, on the first Friday of every month, new employees that joined within the previous month walk around the office to deliver donuts and coffee. This tradition provides a great way for new employees to meet other seasoned employees and experience CXtec's culture.

On a daily basis, CXtec has a goal to make work fun, motivate, and keep people focused but to attain clear targets at the same time.

- Each day at CXtec starts with a **five-minute pep rally** where all employees come together in the atrium to celebrate reached goals, talk about deals of the previous day, cheer each other on, discuss what needs to be accomplished that day, and announce any other relevant happenings. It is not only a time to be together and build camaraderie, but is also a great communication mechanism.
- Every day at CXtec is also a **casual day**. The organization recognizes that many of its employees are connected to headsets for eight hours a day and that being comfortable contributes to success at their jobs, and therefore for the company as well.

## Recognizing a Job Well Done

Recognition is a large part of CXtec's culture. The company tries very hard to be inclusive and share successes throughout the organization. When a sales person wins a deal, an announcement is made over the intercom system and everyone cheers and claps in celebration. The announcement not only recognizes and thanks the salesperson, but all employees involved in the deal, including operations employees that support the sales staff. Colorful balloons are tied to the cubicle of the sales person with the amount of the deal written on them so at any time a quick glance around the office will tell you who is having a good month, encouraging one to one praises as well. CXtec encourages recognition at every level:

- **Peer to Peer:** The **Pride Program** is an additional inclusive recognition program whereby employees can nominate their peers for recognition of good work. The criteria is linked to the company's five core values and prizes such as gift certificates and VIP parking passes are awarded to recipients.
- **Outstanding in the Company:** The most prestigious of awards for achieving targets is the **President's Club Award**, given to top sales performers for the year. Award recipients, each along with a guest, enjoy a seven-day Caribbean cruise with the CEO, COO, and VP of Business Development. For those back at the office, the week is celebrated with a land cruise theme with cruise-like events each day. This inclusive effort of celebrating simultaneously keeps people motivated and sales continue to do well through the cruise week.
- **Within the Community:** Recognition of CXtec employees is also taken outside of the organization through community awards such as **Top 40 under 40** and **Women in Business** awards. The company nominates employees for relevant honors and then purchases a table at the award event and invites family members and friends of the awarded to celebrate.

## Teamwork as a Company and a Community

Teambuilding is also a strong focus at CXtec. For larger projects, cross-functional teams with members from all departments are formed to tackle the work together. This practice prevents silo thinking and gives people an understanding and appreciation for the work of others, not to mention that it helps accomplish tasks quickly and effectively.

- Each year, employees make suggestions for and **vote on a theme for the company** for that particular year. For example, 2006 is the year of the Lion, which represents Pride, Courage, and Excellence. Other team building events include quarterly-themed sales contests, crazy dress days, and cubicle decorating contests.

- **Training and development** also represent an opportunity for teambuilding at CXtec. The company offers a career development class comprised of a cross-sectional group of 60 employees from all different departments, providing an opportunity to learn and grow, but also to build relationships with co-workers from different areas of the organization.
- One of the most unique aspects of the CXtec culture is **the corporate band**, the CXtec Dinosaurs. The band is comprised of CXtec staff and plays for local charitable events and company functions. The organization entered the band into Fortune Magazine and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's battle of the corporate bands competition and subsidized travel costs for all employees to be able to follow them to Ohio for the live show.

A great source of pride for CXtec employees is the way in which the organization gives back to the community. Being one of the few technology companies in the Syracuse area, they are able to use the work they do to benefit local causes such as hospitals and schools.

- CXtec contributed **wireless infrastructure to a local hospital** so guests could access the internet while visiting patients.
- A state hospital also recently received a **technology contribution** from CXtec that will dramatically increase its effectiveness. Cameras were installed on towers on each interstate in the surrounding area, and CXtec donated the technology infrastructure for the hospital to access these cameras and view crash sites so they are aware of the situation when accident victims are brought in for treatment.

### Inclusion of All Interest Levels

All of these practices are great for those who are interested in participating, but what about those employees who would rather not be a part of it? CXtec recognizes that people have different levels of interest around the opportunities provided and manages this by simply allowing people to participate to the extent that they would like to. There is no corporate push for participation and people are not viewed differently whether they choose to join in the fun or not. They also take into account the diverse workforce and accommodate different interests. With the employee population ranging from 18 to 70 years old, the company realizes that it must provide different avenues for workplace enjoyment.

### Other ideas...

Several other companies also on the call offered examples of ways in which they build and encourage camaraderie and teamwork within their organizations.

- Benchmark Assisted Living is proud of its Cultural Ambassador program where one line-level associate from each department serves as the cheerleader of culture. This person's job is to monitor the climate of his/her facilities, report back at quarterly meetings, and discuss improvement plans. Each ambassador receives a small increase in pay for the additional responsibility and the company has seen a dramatic increase in employee satisfaction because people are feeling heard and connected.
- New England Baptist Hospital likes to keep an open mind and listen to its employees to learn what they like and provide that as often as possible. Each new hire fills out an employee preference form at his/her start with the organization letting the company know his/her favorites (i.e. food, candy, music, recognition avenues, etc.). They recently learned through this mechanism that a large percentage of employees enjoy salsa dancing so the company will soon be sponsoring a salsa dancing event!
- LLBean celebrates its core value of Outdoor Heritage by paying every employee to spend a day outside learning about things endorsed in the company's catalogue (i.e. kayaking and camp cooking). This provides team building opportunities as well as an opportunity to better understand the products they sell.

### Conclusion

There may be many ways to build and encourage an inclusive culture characterized by teamwork and camaraderie, but the benefits are universal: a dedicated and engaged workforce that enjoys coming to work. Each practice described above is a way for the organization to show the employees that they care and recognize the time and effort they give to the work they do. Employees at CXtec feel welcomed upon arrival, can be themselves at work, and truly feel like they are a team working toward a shared goal.