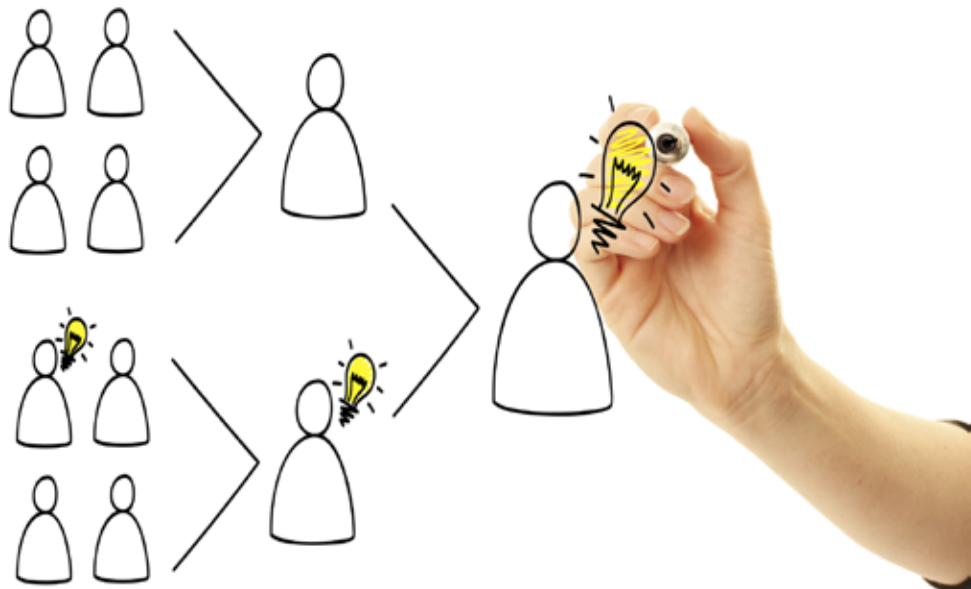


Small Business Offers Big Insights On Best Workplace Practices



By **Amelia Chan**, CHRP

WHILE THE VAST MAJORITY OF British Columbians are employed by small businesses, there has always been an inverse relationship regarding the amount of media coverage they receive. As a result, rarely do we hear of their triumphs or regard them in light of the valuable lessons for HR professionals within organizations of any size.

In fact, with approximately 385,000 small businesses accounted for in 2012, by Small Business BC, small business represents 98 per cent of all businesses in the province. Similarly, the estimated 1,032,700 people employed by small business in BC accounted for 55 per cent of private-sector employment. Moreover, small business does big business and accounted for 26 per cent of the province's gross domestic product in 2012.

Best Workplace Finalists Inspire

Without a doubt, small business matters in large amounts—as always, it's good people that make it all happen.

This February, I had the opportunity to explore five of the best small businesses in BC—and reflect upon what made their workplaces such positive places to be. Even though Small Business BC had obviously narrowed the field, helping them select the winner of the *2014 Best Workplace Award* was no easy task.

So, while i-Worx of North Vancouver ultimately took the title, the people

practices at play within Homeroom Small Business Solutions, CNN Bikes, The Oracle, and Cucumber Marketing similarly inspired this article.

Each of the five finalists represent both the lifeblood of BC as small business operators; they also provide an open and illuminating window into innovative and effective people practices. The very essence of such employers' success stories speaks to the heart of human resources—even though the majority lack any formal HR function.

The Humility to Succeed

What drives these small business champions is very similar to big business champions—a desire to succeed. What distinguishes the champions of small business, as represented by the Small Business BC *Best Workplace* finalists, is the humility with which they triumph—and the ability to have their wisdoms taken to heart by any HR professional.

Their understated confidence and lack of overriding ego is a hallmark in such operations. Traditional organizational politics don't have the same sway within these smaller entities. Such modesty isn't just charming, it's necessary because within their business models, every human is counted upon as an integral resource.

While each finalist was required to speak to their companies virtues, what spoke most loudly was the simple fact that

they had been brought forward as nominees by their proud employees in the first place.

Here are some good takeaways that small business can certainly teach or remind their bigger counterparts.

Intrinsic Innovation

When you don't have large budgets, creativity can help you go really far. The best thing about applying creativity in the workplace is that it naturally leads to innovation.¹ While other organizations may be treating innovation itself as a separate issue to address, the necessity of doing more with less through teamwork becomes a built-in secret weapon for small businesses. For example, i-Worx has monthly town hall style meetings over dinner with plenty of opportunity to share a 'blue sky' moment to think completely outside the box.

Ask Why Before What

Making each effort count in small business requires a firm commitment to asking "why" before embarking on the "what". Tailored problem solving that fits and puts the "why" up front is key. CCN Bikes in North Vancouver makes a practice of being proactive and tailors its work spaces to meet individuals' wellness and, ultimately, productivity needs. At Homeroom Small Business Solutions in Vancouver, they worked together to create a company vision statement which incorporated their

individual goals. This level of pro-activity and buy-in is a very grassroots approach and enmeshed in the 'corporate' culture of many small businesses from the start.

Dare to Care with Natural Leadership

Small business thrives on the basis of intuitive, charismatic leadership guided by strong business instincts. "Just making things work" often boils down to developing unconventional business models aligned to the finer details of employees' lives and client needs. Over time, savvy instincts may evolve into successful formulas, but the core leadership approach remains guided by a heightened degree of emotional intelligence and flexibility. Kelly Oswald of The Oracle Emporium in Whistler, and now North Vancouver, has grounded her success in diversity, both on the shelf and in her team, from day one. The Oracle does not have staff, they have talent that thrives in the face of online competition, economic turbulence and the whims of the weather in a seasonal tourism destination alike.

Empathy and Compassion

Quite often, small business owners are previously frustrated former employees who take it upon themselves to improve their own situation and this gives them far better insight into their own employees. It's like a 'rewind and do-over' for past scenarios, a phoenix rising from the ashes of past employment failures and regrets. Their experience fuels a passion to provide better leadership and opportunities for those in their employ. Cucumber Marketing Inc. in Vancouver volunteers the fruits of their experience within the local business community by presenting free workshops. In fact, all the *Best Workplace* finalists actively give of their time and expertise and consider it part of their organizational culture.

Small Issues Make a Big Difference

Perhaps it is unsurprising that their community mindset comes from a healthy core culture. Each of the finalists had evolved various great ideas for their company wellness initiatives too, and a firm understanding of the link between health, happiness and productivity. That these small businesses set mental and physical health as a priority in their planning, and with truly limited resources, already

distinguishes their mindset. Each has found a fundamental ROI in the form of healthy workplace engagement.

Successful small business owners are natural problem solvers with no lack of flexibility or grit. The businesses they create and run are fuelled by a clear purpose which often begins as a pet project and evolves via creativity, ingenuity and demand. As a result, the workplaces they create offer big insights into best practices for business of all sizes. **P**

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1 According to Dr. Cris Wildermuth's research on innovative leadership, "Creativity and innovation are not synonymous. Innovation is...the result of individual creativity and social processes that allow the creative products or processes to be implemented and disseminated. We can talk about individual creativity - but not individual innovation."