

Growing a Strong Employee Culture

groSolar

The Story | groSolar, headquartered in White River Junction, VT, is a company that makes the story of “triple bottom line” (people, planet, profits) easy to tell. The 152-employee firm is fast growing, has a product that saves money and energy, and works to instill a strong culture of employee engagement across multiple locations. The company is a leading designer, installer, and distributor of efficient systems for solar electricity and solar hot water nationwide. With a network of warehouses across the U.S., groSolar is the largest 100% US owned distributor.

CEO Jeff Wolfe says the company’s aim is to put “as many solar panels as we can on as many roofs as fast as we can.” And although they are doing just that, employee motivation comes from a deeper sense of purpose. “People are willing to contribute to a larger good when it matters to them,” says Wolfe.

Engagement Strategies | groSolar has twice been recognized as a Best Place to Work in Vermont. Employees receive 70%-80% employer-paid healthcare. About 80 early employees hold stock options. And employees receive a discount on solar panels. The relaxed work environment means there’s no time clock or dress code, and well behaved dogs are allowed at work – perks that are not taken for granted and demonstrate trust, according to Human Resource Director Shelly Bragg, who is part of the executive management team.

Careful hiring is another key practice. Bragg interviews 95% percent of potential hires not just to confirm their readiness for the job but to be sure they “absolutely fit with our culture,” she said.

Continuous communications and career path opportunities are other important parts of the groSolar model. Management leads monthly webcasts where Wolfe shares specific details of the company’s performance and the broader solar market. “We talk about the numbers at a high level and share successes and challenges,” he explains. “The hardest thing at a company is communication, especially when you are spread across the nation. We let people know that if you

don't know something, probably no one else knows it either, so that people in remote offices don't have the feeling of being left out."

Wolfe makes it a point to sometimes announce strategic or interesting news from a field office rather than always at HQ. "I spend a lot of time on the phone, and I try to respond quickly to emails and share information with others," he said. The company also has a monthly newsletter to communicate key developments.

Wolfe notes that phone conferences and, increasingly, webcasts have improved intra-office connectivity. Video conferencing was added after a survey revealed that employees wanted the company to take more steps to better unite remote offices. Employees at all levels also visit other locations for training and sharing of best practices. "We're strong believers in the face to face," says Bragg.

In addition to flexible work schedules, the company has stepped in to help coordinate carpools. In one case, four employees were able to save more than \$100/week by carpooling. In addition, the company offers the option to telecommute, which Wolfe says has allowed them to attract and retain strong employees. "They work very hard for us as a result."

Given its size and capacity, groSolar offers an important perspective on the workforce development needs of the new green economy.



AT A GLANCE GROSOLAR

Business:

Residential and commercial solar installation

Locations:

White River Junction, VT

Employees:

152

Revenues:

\$57 million in 2009

Ownership:

Broad based equity sharing for early employees

Engagement:

- clear communication of core values
- HR Director part of executive management team
- flexible work schedules and telecommuting
- extensive training
- strong benefits
- culture of trust and respect

Business result:

- excellent customer retention
- increased ability to integrate acquisitions

“We need people with solid skills that we can train,” Wolfe explains. “At our rate of expansion, we’re inventing a lot of processes. So the competence of our people may well be the difference between our success and failure in the downstream solar markets.”

He adds that workforce development and educational institutions must be tuned to “what business really needs.” In the meantime, groSolar has sometimes taken a role in training local contractors in green building design, such as when the headquarters location installed solar panels and other green features. Bragg notes that helping build local skills will ultimately pay dividends to the company in increased business.

Business Results | Its culture of engaged employees has been key to groSolar’s fast growth and ability to smoothly integrate multiple acquisitions across the U.S. over the past five years. The bottom line for this fast growing green economy company is its people. “Everyone says this, but employees really are our most important resource,” says Wolfe. “We ask a lot of them and reward them well.”

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **A strong culture of employee engagement can be carried across multiple company locations with care, conference calls, travel, and excellent communications.**
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