

Our story: how our culture transformation reignited the passion in our people

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Tom Mahoney

Transformational times. We're experiencing them like never before. No matter the industry, organizations everywhere are facing unprecedented market and economic pressures, adapting to new generations in the workforce and learning to survive amidst factors like the digital revolution and artificial intelligence.

At ITA Group, we've felt the impact as much as anyone. People are our business, and in today's fast-paced, competitive business landscape, igniting the passion within them can be a tough job. We work passionately and tirelessly to find ways to inspire and re-inspire our clients' people and to create new value in the eyes of our customers. But it's become increasingly apparent in recent years that premier talent is going to be our differentiator; that attracting and retaining the right people will be key to us staying relevant and compelling as an organization.

A major milestone was the catalyst for re-inspiring our own people

Besides strategizing innovative ways to create new value in the eyes of our customers, ITA Group was preparing for a major event in 2013:

our 50th anniversary. As it neared, our executive leadership team contemplated how we would celebrate the milestone success while demonstrating that the future of the employee-owned organization is just as bright, if not brighter, than the past.

At the time, we had goals in place for the decade ahead: what the size of the organization would look like by the year 2020, how many people we were going to serve and how we would share our success with the communities we live and work in.

We knew we could not play with a playbook designed 10 years ago if we wanted to realize our 2020 goals and lay a solid foundation for the next 50 years. We had to embrace change, and now was our chance.

Defining our new direction was a collaborative effort

Once the decision to re-evaluate our workplace and our culture was made, we knew we had to further assess the situation. We had to get a clear picture of the current perception of our culture, and to do that, we needed to connect with the people that were going to drive the success of the business.



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That meant focus groups. It also meant that the c-suite had to step aside. Conducting the research without an executive presence allowed the team in place to get honest, meaningful answers to questions like, "How did our own people perceive our organization overall? As an employee owner, what things did they value, and what things were missing?"

The feedback was astounding. It was clear we weren't embracing change as quickly as we needed to, but there were foundational values our team members respected and appreciated about our organization. The result was the creation of a 20-person cross-functional "culture club" that led the way in transforming our cultural foundation.

We started reigniting the passion in 2013 and have not stopped yet

Our intentional transformation started more than four years ago and it has touched everything from our visual brand to the benefits we're able to offer employee owners.

We kicked off the initiative by redesigning our corporate logo to more clearly reflect who we are as a company and the variety and complexity of the solutions we offer. Then, before our 50th anniversary celebration, we moved out of our existing office space into a more contemporary and vibrant space. The move was strategic, and not only do the aesthetics visually indicate the nature of our work but also the layout represents the transparency we endorse as an organization. Glass executive office walls, team collaboration areas and sit-to-stand desks were designed to inspire our efforts and contribute to the overall well-being of every employee owner in the company.

In 2016, we continued the transition by rolling out an enhanced offering of team member benefits. The biggest change was our transition from business casual to smart casual dress. For an organizational culture historically rooted in tradition, denim as a daily dress code option ignited team members' excitement. It has given our people flexibility to showcase their individuality, while allowing the organization to maintain a professional atmosphere.

New milestone anniversary gifts, including a month-long sabbatical option and airline tickets, give team members the opportunity to create meaningful experiences as a reward for their commitment. Summer flex hours let them maximize the season their way. And, team building includes ballpark outings that allow everyone to get out of the office for an afternoon, kick back and cheer on the home team.

Team members also have the opportunity to connect with the organization and each other through our internal employee well-being/engagement platform. The new approach and technology was unveiled in 2016 and supports our employee owners by underscoring the five tenets of employee well-being: performance, career, wellness, social and community.

What it looks like when we are the client

Throughout our transformation, we have made it a priority to develop and deliver the same strategic recommendations we propose for our clients, and to intentionally cater to the wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that influence our people.

That is why, when it came time to announce the enhanced benefit offering, the team came together to craft a strategic solution. The result was a two-week drip campaign that

aligned with our 2016 "Be the Reason" brand campaign rollout. Daily, team members came in to surprise desk-drop gifts, each supporting the overarching message. The movement created the ultimate team member experience and generated tremendous energy throughout the organization, even prompting team members to come in during their personal time off to check out the latest announcement.

We should've done this sooner

A lot sooner. That's been my own personal reaction and the resounding message from our executive leadership team. Morale is at an all-time high, and it's driving metrics that impact the long-term success of the organization.

We've seen a notable 9 per cent increase in retention of team members in technology-related roles, which has contributed to 94 per cent overall employee retention, 95 per cent customer retention and double-digit growth in both revenue and operating income. Hired employee referrals are on the rise, which tells us that our team members are proud of the organization they're a part of. And from an engagement perspective, we've seen measurable increases in both team member training and volunteerism.

But I think the biggest impact is that team members have been able to see that our leadership team is willing and able to adapt to change. Our commitment to ensuring we stay relevant in the marketplace has come through in *respecting* and *appreciating* our employee owners, and it hasn't gone unnoticed.

Take care of your people. They'll take care of your business

"It's not in the budget" is an objection I hear time and again

from corporate decision makers, but evaluating and transforming our culture was a move we couldn't afford not to make. After all, it has long been proven that organizations who invest in their people consistently outperform industry peers. There is a direct correlation: Take care of your people. They'll take care of your business. At ITA Group, we couldn't find that sentiment to be any truer.

About the author

Tom Mahoney is the Chairperson and CEO of the ITA Group (www.itagroup.com) leads the organization in its ultimate mission: creating and managing events, incentives and recognition programs that align and motivate people. With boundless passion and optimism, he ensures the clients of ITA Group achieve higher levels of success through the motivation and engagement of the people that touch their

business. He joined ITA Group in 1987 and expanded his role to Executive Vice President – Sales and Marketing and later, Chief Operating Officer. In 2016, he was named Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer and received recognition as one of the “25 Most Influential People in the Motivation Industry” by *Incentive Magazine*. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa. Tom Mahoney can be contacted at: TMahoney@ITAGroup.com