

culturehounds

Employees' needs take center stage for five finalists

PEOPLE IN TECHNOLOGY

and financial services fields are sometimes stereotyped as not being the best communicators. But many of these firms realize that creating rewarding workplaces is still one way to attract and keep the best people.

Four of the five finalists come from those fields with the fifth being a nanny and tutor service franchising company. They've all mastered the art of finding out what is important to their people and trying to use that knowledge to their advantage.

Connecting consultants

Nick Hernandez lives by an axiom espoused by former Intel chairman Andy Grove: Culture eats strategy for lunch every day.

As his firm, St. Paul-based IT infrastructure consulting firm Aeritae Consulting, expanded, it had 55 employees spread out across 50 projects and 20 different clients at a time. This created an issue: How do you create and maintain a corporate culture when most of your employees — highly sought-after 10- to 25-year industry veterans — aren't in the office?

"They were experiencing feelings of

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHN

photograph by John Noltner

isolation," says Hernandez, CEO. "Some of them were going native into the client culture. Some were joining clients. We've had phenomenal growth, but we saw this as a really big problem. We knew we had to do something quick."

So the company set out on a cultural audit to determine its "organizational DNA," with the goal of determining the company's values and translating that into tangible and leverageable assets.

Aeritae did stakeholder interviews of clients, employees and executives and learned what was on the employees' minds. They found people were feeling disconnected and they wanted something to rally around.

As a result of the audit, company

FINALIST RUNDOWN

» **AERITAE CONSULTING GROUP LTD.**, IT consulting: conducted a stakeholder audit to define its "organizational DNA," with a goal to convert values and culture into tangible assets.

Nick Hernandez is CEO: 651.229.0300; nherandez@aeritae.com; www.aeritae.com.

» **BPK&Z**, accounting firm: accelerates professional development and succession planning with a Leaders in Training program, in which accountants volunteer to participate for two years.

John Edson is shareholder: 763.546.6211; jedson@bpkz.com; www.bpkz.com.

» **COLLEGE NANNIES & TUTORS FRANCHISING**, tutoring and nanny service franchisor: chose "green" practices for its new corporate headquarters, driven by interests of its key employee group.

Peter Lytle is chairman: 952.476.0613; www.collegenannies.com.

» **NEXT LEVEL CAFE INC.**, IT consulting: revamped recruiting and hiring process, including formalized "Week 1" training curriculum and "team chat," to improve retention.

Rich Anderson is CEO: 952.883.0602; richa@nlcafe.com; www.nlcafe.com.

» **TRISSENTIAL LLC**, IT management consulting: created the role of Chief Culture Officer, charged with monitoring the company's "cultural pulse."

Michael Vinje is principal: 952.595.7970; mvinje@trissentential.com; www.trissentential.com.

WINNER'S ADVICE

» Use an outside organization to perform an unbiased audit of your firm's culture from the viewpoint of employees, clients and your leadership team, advises Nick Hernandez, Aeritae Consulting Group, winner for Best Practices in People & Workplace.

» "Create a forum to capture what is on the hearts and minds of employees. Deep down in their soul employees have a strong desire to be heard and want to know that their opinion matters. That's why a cultural audit is a great place to start."

» "Empower the 'Johnny Appleseeds' in your group," Hernandez says. "Laud the employee or employees who come forward willing, ready and able to help drive change. Count as blessings those employees who truly inspire and set genuine causes in motion."

» "Enable this as an employee-driven initiative. Be prepared as business owners to fully support every single facet of this unique journey."

» "Be present, be alert and participate, yet be ready to get out of the way at times as well. Be open-minded as you progress on this wonderful journey of cultural discovery."

executives had employees take charge. They created the Aeritae Community Involvement initiative, in which more than half the employees do pro-bono community work with area nonprofits. The company also embraced skill-based volunteerism where employees are putting their talents to use gratis for nonprofits, coaching and mentoring them on how to build their IT infrastructure.

Finally, the company created the Aeritae Innovation Incubator, which allows employees an opportunity to affect the company by suggesting and implementing their own best prac-

tices. There are eight projects in flight.

"Employee engagement has gone through the roof," Hernandez says. "The buzz is there. And they are moving from success to significance. Nothing motivates more than helping others."

