

GROWERTALKS

Features

5/1/2022

Small, Big Things

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Maria Taylor has only been Metrolina's Chief People Officer for nine months, but in that time she's learned one very important thing: the ownership really cares for its employees.

For being one of the largest growing operations in the country, with over 1,000 employees at two locations, Metrolina places most of its core value in its people, said Maria.

The company has always had its employees top of mind with regard to its benefits package and wellness initiatives, but when leadership sat down to discuss future strategy, they realized they needed more of a multi-pronged approach that tied better to its values rather than a sole focus on sales.

“Who Do We Want To Be”

If you're a regular reader of this publication and have enjoyed Abe VanWingerden's columns, you know how much he and his leadership team at Metrolina value planning and strategy. And when Maria came into the organization, they were already actively identifying a new strategic plan. Referred to as the “Who Do We Want To Be Strategy,” it's a 10-year plan that shifts from a revenue-only focus to a focus on top-line growth, using a four-pronged approach in order to accomplish its goals, while also enhancing a “World Class Employee Experience.”

The four prongs of Metrolina's new strategy are: helping its employees to grow and develop; staying ahead of the curve by being innovative; focusing on quality and service; and fostering a safe work environment.



Pictured: A big-screen TV in every breakroom shows “Metrolina TV,” which includes information about sales goals updates, upcoming events, employee spotlights, and health and safety tips. They recently started using QR codes that appear on the TVs that employees can scan with their phones to go directly to the company's virtual suggestion box.

If you stop to consider all four parts, you'll see a similar theme within each one: none of those would be successful without the help and buy-in from their employees.

Maria's background includes human resources for an adult beverage company, which she said was fun and exciting, but she did notice that some companies “lose sight of the people” because they put too much of a focus on revenue. Constantly worrying about sales numbers puts a lot of pressure on employees, especially if they don't know why or how their jobs affect the bottom line.

“If your senior leadership team is only focused on revenue, it would be very easy to forget about the impact on

people,” explained Maria. “From what I’ve learned in my nine months here, that wasn’t necessarily something that was happening because the family really does have this strong tie to their employees. But I think by putting it into not only the strategy, but our values, just makes that very clear to our employees and our prospective employees.”

Communicating to the crowd

Engaging with a very large staff, and keeping them happy and productive is a challenge, but Metrolina’s leadership has used it as an opportunity to see how they can improve their communication methods. One of the most important is making sure the company’s goals and mission are consistent, clearly understood and communicated.

“Everyone knows and breathes the same requirements. And it also helps employees understand that this really is what we care about as an organization,” said Maria. “So whether you’re coming in or you’re looking to grow within the organization, you can be sure those values align with what’s important to you.”



Pictured: Part of Metrolina’s new safety initiative is to make PPE more accessible across its large facility to employees. Employees use their IDs to punch in and it releases the PPE as needed and approved for their positions.

One way Metrolina does this is with “Metrolina TV” (“MTV” for short). There’s a big-screen TV in every breakroom that shows everything from sales goals updates to upcoming events and employee spotlights to health and safety tips. They recently started using QR codes that appear on the

TVs that employees can scan with their phones to go directly to the virtual suggestion box (more on that below).

For the more “heavier news” from the company, like organizational changes or strategic plan updates, Metrolina has implemented director meetings where the leadership team meets three times a year and then the information is communicated down through each supervisor.

The company also is trying out a new program where a committee of employee representatives from different departments gets together on a regular basis to help develop communication strategies. The goal is to learn what’s working, what isn’t and how the company can make it better. Maria said that there’s never an assumption that what Metrolina is doing to communicate with its employees is the best way. There’s always a feeling that there’s room for improvement and that feedback directly from the staff is crucial in making those decisions.

“Just because we’ve done all of these things doesn’t mean that’s how employees want to hear about the information,” she said. “As the company shifts and grows, you have to adjust with that. And part of that is your employees change. Life has really rocked us the last two and a half years, and I think that’s changed our expectations. You constantly have to stay conscious of that and it is always going to be dynamic. We have four generations in the workforce—how are we reaching all of them?”

Small things that are big

Many companies survey their employees to gauge morale and Metrolina is no different, sending a survey to its employees once a year since 2015. But in 2020 Maria said there was a breakthrough—one employee asked for a way to communicate and make suggestions to management more often. They felt once a year wasn’t enough. From there, Metrolina’s “virtual suggestion box” was created.

“We can track and monitor it so we can make sure we’re actually following up with everyone who submits a suggestion,” said Maria. “We found ways with our partnership internally with IT, marketing and HR to make it accessible.”

Maria said that since Metrolina implemented the virtual suggestion box in the fall of 2021, they've had over 50 write-in suggestions from employees, and many actions have been taken from them as the company follows up with each one.

One example was a request to add more water stations so employees don't have to walk far for a drink. Another was to fix an unnoticed pothole that was at the back of the property.

This two-way constant communication with employees also has spurred ideas from leadership that seem small or simple, but are really major to the staff. Like vending machines with personal protective equipment (PPE)—Metrolina is a sprawling maze of greenhouse bays and sometimes it can take a total of 30 minutes to walk from one end to the front office. So instead of workers walking to the office to get their PPE for the day, they can get them from vending machines placed around the property.



Pictured: One of the many benefits Metrolina provides is on-site annual preventative care, like a mobile mammogram van, and flu and COVID vaccine clinics.

Maria refers to these examples as “a small, big thing” that makes employees’ lives easier (and safer) by addressing their needs quickly.

“It really is exciting to see that our employees don’t have to wait until once a year to supply that kind of feedback,”

said Maria. “And that’s on top of the open-door policy that we’ve already had. That’s how we develop trust and continued improvement, not only at the executive level, but in all levels of the organization.”

Over the last two years, Metrolina also has made a significant investment in training and development for its employees at every level. If there’s a new skill or topic that someone wants to learn more about, Maria and her team help get them the training. They brought in an outside career development expert to hold in-person and virtual classes, and Maria said the reception has been overwhelmingly positive.

The company also just developed an in-house “how-to” learning management series that focuses on core skills for supervisors and other employees who want to learn leadership skills. Some will be in-person, instructor-led classes, but there will be what Maria calls “bite-sized” online courses based on competency or skill.

It’s all about giving employees more opportunities that are accessible and convenient so they feel like they’re truly a valued part of the organization ... because that’s the reality.

“We’re so excited to make this program accessible to employees in real time, so they can take a course and build a development plan,” said Maria. “It’s really about opening up the opportunities for our employees to grow and build career paths. If somebody wants to grow, how do you get that information in front of them? How do you help them know what they need to do to grow without only relying on their manager? This is another way we offer support.”

Metrolina Greenhouses’ 5 Core Values

People: Develop Exceptional People

Innovate: Constantly

Quality: Produce Superior Product or Services

Integrity: Operate With Integrity



Safety: Model a Safe and Strong Work Ethic