Winning ways
Multiyear honoree aims at continuing winning streak

By Elizabeth Millard, Contributing writer

As he began to describe how Western Bank treats its employees, CEO Steve Erdall paused a moment when laughter trickled in from down the hallway. Smiling, he said, “We hear a lot of that around here.”

Now in its fifth year as a Great Place to Work, the bank is eager to retain that title for years to come. In each of its six locations, Western Bank offers a buffet of benefits, including an incentive plan, profit sharing, employee bank accounts and a flexible medical benefit option.

Although employees value the range of perks, Erdall noted that the workplace culture is the main reason loyalty is so high. Not only do staffers feel comfortable joking throughout the day, they also have deep respect for one another. Erdall insists that such a feeling goes a long way in building a successful organization.

“Everyone that’s here knows that the team is more important than any one individual,” he said. “That’s something we see professionally and personally.”

— Steve Erdall, CEO, Western Bank

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At a recent board meeting, Erdall said one of the bank’s primary goals is to communicate and support the maintenance of its strong internal culture. He emphasized the importance of the bank’s family atmosphere and flat management structure, and noted, “everyone is a worker bee.”

Employees do a great deal of “hanging out socially,” Erdall said, and are fond of celebrating a range of milestones such as birthdays and employee anniversaries. Sometimes, they don’t even need a reason to celebrate. The bank organizes get-togethers twice a year, which gets increasingly challenging as the number of employees steadily grows larger.

“It can be difficult to find a way for everyone to come together when you have many locations and more employees. But we think it’s important,” Erdall said.

Western Bank’s most recent initiative to bring employees together is “Success Through Active Relationships” (STAR), a mentorship program that pairs junior-level employees with executives. A pilot program with two pairs has just been completed, and STAR is now ready for a company-wide rollout, said Chris Dressel, the bank’s senior vice president of marketing and human resources.

The program was sparked by an internal customer service committee and feedback from many employees, who were eager to find a way to bridge competency gaps. Western Bank realized it could strengthen employee relationships and boost overall expertise at the same time.

Both mentors and protégés benefit from the program, said Jeanne Kassim, one of the mentors in the pilot program. In working with one of the relationship bankers who wants to become a manager, Kassim is reminded of her own career path, and has become enthusiastic about helping someone else make the climb.

In the program, the bank will match pairs based on their requests, preferences and skill gaps. In their march toward management and professional goals, protégés will also have the opportunity to gain expertise in “soft” skills such as interpersonal communication, establishing rapport with customers and dealing with confrontations. As an offshoot of the program, the bank plans on creating a skill bank, where an employee can list his or her areas of expertise and help others who might be lacking in those skills. Someone who’s a whiz at an Excel spreadsheet program can offer advice and informal training to an employee who might be struggling with the software application.

Kassim believes helping other employees is a natural extension of the camaraderie she’s enjoyed at the bank for almost 19 years. “Of course, there are things that drive you crazy. But when you work with friends, they don’t bother you so much. There’s a reason I’ve been here so long. I can’t imagine why I’d want to go anywhere else.”

Dressel said the mentorship program is a perfect fit for a company that inspires employee devotion. “We all care about each other, and that sounds almost too good to be true, I know. But if you ask any employee here if they feel respected, if they feel valued, I think they’d say ‘yes.’”

Employee satisfaction is also good for business, she said. Happy employees communicate more effectively with customers and spread a feeling of goodwill. “Our customers feel it. At a bank, success is all about relationships. That starts with our employees.”

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