



# **Creating a great place to work**

by Jim Hayward, Baringa Partners

*Baringa Partners - proud to be awarded 1<sup>st</sup> place in The Great Place to Work® Institute's 'Best Workplaces Programme', 2010*

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Our people are our greatest asset. How many times have you heard someone trot out this tarnished, worn out old cliché? Undervalued through over use, it's a glib platitude that often has no basis in fact at the companies who use it but have no policy or infrastructure to encourage the best and brightest on board.

However, when organisations can say it and mean it, then they have a truly powerful message. It's particularly true of companies that offer consultancy-style services, where the goods or products being sold are, in effect, an individual's knowledge, skills, experience and understanding.

This is why creating a great place to work is such an important factor in organisational success. Attracting, keeping, encouraging and inspiring the best people to do their best possible work, ensures that a positive cycle of recruitment, delivery and growth are maintained. Organisations that have developed strong, empowering cultures have benefited financially from reduced staff churn, a higher number of recruiting referrals and ultimately better, more profitable, contracts.

But in the end, these are almost side effects. Fundamentally, creating a great place to work is simply the right thing to do, if you want to feel good about what you do.

Baringa Partners is not a human resources consultancy. Our areas of specialisation are the deregulated energy markets and the financial services sectors, where we partner with organisations to help them develop and deliver key elements of their business strategy. However we do believe that our results, and our ability to stand out in a relatively crowded market, come from our people. Baringa has invested a great deal of our energy into creating a great place to work, and has been named as the best place to work in the UK by The Great Place to Work<sup>®</sup> Institute. The 2010 accolade follows the culmination of a four-year period in which Baringa has been consistently recognised among the top twenty Best Workplaces in the UK, achieving a second-place ranking for the past two years, behind Danone and Google respectively.

This white paper is based on Baringa Partners' experiences of developing a great place to work.

### **1. Put people at the centre of your operating model**

This is the cornerstone of being an employer of choice, regardless of the business and sector the organisation is in. This is the standard to be created and executed against. It sounds straightforward enough, but that simplicity can be deceptive. Paradoxically, it is often harder for

consultancy-type organisations for whom attracting, retaining and deploying a high calibre of individual is fundamental to success, and the bottom line is measured in pounds per head.

The challenge is to find a *modus operandi* that services both client demands and employee needs. Without adequate planning or stated guidelines it is too easy to fall into habits that focus almost exclusively on client service and fail to take into account the commitments that people have outside work. However, since winning new business depends on the quality of people, the long-term view must be to maintain a consistent and uncompromising focus on getting the right people into your organisation. That focus ensures that the foundations for an attractive workplace are laid.

## **2. Encourage ownership of ideas**

It's important to remember that the best ideas do not always come from the upper echelons of an organisation. Experience brings a number of benefits, but it is also prone to editing ideas or following only proven methodologies. Innovative suggestions are just as likely to come from lower down the organisation. However, those suggestions will only see the light of day if there is a culture of positive encouragement. If, on the other hand, ideas from junior members of staff are passed to senior management to execute, you discourage initiative and creativity, and encourage divisions within your organisation. By giving people ownership of their own ideas and recognising their contribution, then you get the creativity back and build up strong bonds of loyalty and community within the organisation.

## **3. Make people feel part of the company**

Encouraging ownership is part of the wider picture of making people feel a valued part of the company as a whole, and not just a cog in the wheel of their particular project or department. Each organisation has its own particular hurdles to overcome in this area, but the obvious one for consultancies is that their employees typically spend much of their working lives on site with clients. In these circumstances it can be all too easy to lose sight of the firm and its culture. Relatively young or rapidly growing companies should also be wary, as it's not unusual for divisions between old hands and fresh faces to open up, for cliques to develop, and the values and a sense of cohesion that drove the company's starters to be lost in the second or third 'generation.'

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to make people feel as though they belong, but they do need to be constantly repeated. Success comes from the small things that are consistently reiterated day after day.

*At Baringa we hold regular company meetings in a central location to communicate new initiatives and company progress. This includes pre-arranging and committing to spending that time away from client site. These meetings ensure that no-one loses sight of the company itself, and that none of our colleagues end up isolated out on a project.*

#### **4. Build up trust**

Upside-down management is one of the buzzwords currently gaining ground among senior management and, although applicable in many circumstances, it is an appropriate one for consultancy businesses in particular. It is about breaking down hierarchies and recognising that all levels of staff have responsibility for the company and its future and an acknowledgement of the reality that it is the junior members of staff who have the most crucial, daily interactions with clients. There is a lesson to be drawn from major retail operations, such as supermarkets, banks and call centres, who invest significant resources in ensuring that their ‘front-line’ staff on the tills or the phones represent the company in the best possible light.

It is therefore just as important for more junior employees to live the culture and values of the organisation as it is for more senior staff. This is why building up trust is so essential. If there is a lack of transparency in the company, if staff do not trust the management, or do not believe in what they are doing then it shows in the most crucial area – with the client. Because trust stems from openness, it is yet another reason why making everyone feel part of the company is so important.

#### **5. Show appreciation**

Everyone likes to be thanked, and appreciating the contribution made by individuals often needs to be no more complicated than that. It is one of those things that is almost unnoticed until it is not done.

Showing appreciation is often equated with remuneration and certainly everyone should earn what they deserve – and deserve what they earn. But relying solely on a high salary to motivate your staff is a trap: financial remuneration is only part of what gets people out of bed in the morning and inspires them to do their best work. If the relationship between management and staff is built solely on the exchange of money then no sense of community, loyalty and trust can be built up. On a purely practical level it puts the organisation in a constant state of competition over wages with other companies, and as soon as someone else waves a slightly larger cheque in front of their eyes, there is nothing to stop employees walking out of the door.

*As well as financial and promotion-based recognition, Baringa shows its appreciation of staff in various ways. Christmas Cards are personalised and hand written by a member of the Senior Management and gifts are tailored to appeal to specific individuals to demonstrate that some thought has gone into picking something out that would suit them.*

## **6. Personalisation**

It may be a statement of the obvious, but one size does not fit all, and it is unreasonable to expect every employee to behave and respond in the same way to an identical set of structures and processes. So, while company policy and guidelines are essential to help create a level playing field for all your staff, training, recruitment, gifts, and indeed everything needs to take into account the fact that individuals are just that, even when there is an aptitude and suitability benchmark in recruitment.

There is a fine line between codifying your processes for easy reiteration, and creating a rigid organisation that demands conformity at all costs. As a basic example, it is clear that an employee coming from a non-consulting background will have different training requirements to an industry stalwart. The simple, and obvious, lesson inherent in that simple statement can be applied in more complex situations and scenarios throughout the organisation.

Personalisation is often one of the biggest challenges at a consulting organisation that sells people, methodologies and systems. In addition, consulting organisations are noted for the 'up or out' approach that is now becoming more wide-spread among blue-chip organisations with strong management tracks. However, career paths differ and progress at a different pace and not everyone fits on the same escalator. Some will go slower and actually want to progress at a different rate because they have young children, an urge to go travelling, or a trans-continental relationship. It's important to recognise that this does not necessarily indicate an absence of ambition. Rather it is an acknowledgement of the real world: that people want and need different things at different times. At the same time high flyers should not be held back simply because policy dictates they spend a certain amount of time at each grade level – or because they are waiting for the next promotion cycle. An organisation that fits round people will be far more successful at keeping them than one that expects employees to bend to its will.

## 7. Encourage a sense of fun

“Work hard, play hard.” Another of the clichés that surrounds business life. But putting the fun into work is more than that. Employees need to have a sense of passion about who they work for and what they do – and that doesn’t come solely from Friday night drinking sessions. They put a lot of themselves into the job to be successful, so they need the room to be more than just the professional face they put on for clients. What’s more, members of staff have to get on with each other, especially if they are working together on site. With a diverse group of employees, at different life stages, there is likely to be no single idea of what constitutes ‘fun’ either: it requires some creative thought, and input from all quarters. In our experience having fun is often seen as both a last-minute add-on to company strategy, and the sole focus of any attempts at creating an attractive working culture. However, as we have discovered, ‘fun’ is a single part of the wider concept of building trust, community and engagement between all members of staff.

*At Baringa Partners we recognise that many of our people have young families, so we invite partners and children to company barbecues. We also have an entertainments committee that is currently investigating a company trip to Sorrento – before putting it to a company vote.*

## 8. Inclusivity

Small companies inevitably have a strong culture, built on the personalities of the founders who established the firm with a particular purpose and sense of differentiation. But there comes a point when it stops being scalable, as ‘new’ people outnumber the initial founders and torch-bearers. At this point the real challenge, of maintaining the culture while being open to all types of people, kicks in. This is when organisations need to build a culture that embraces the many different types of individual that now make up the company. With growing firms there is also a serious risk that the culture actually becomes a barrier, and there are far too many businesses whose managers have realised too late that their inclusive environment has become an exclusive club that no-one else wants to join.

*As a fast growing consultancy, Baringa has come up with a number of solutions to encourage 'inclusion'. We introduce new starters to the whole company, occasionally conducting mock 'Richard and Judy' interviews to find out personal as well as professional information. We have also had "I am a name, not a number" T-shirts printed for company away days. We continue to come up with fun and original ways to engage our employees.*

## **9. Pride**

It is often hard to define what pride means within an organisation. But what we can say is that you know when you have it. At Baringa Partners we define it as being able to go to a dinner party or other social occasion and not mumbling the answer when people ask us what we do! Pride comes from the very top of the organisation, and instils a sense of purpose in everyone else. For Baringa, it's about doing the best work for the client, and being choosy about what we do, going for only the best assignments, and turning down contracts where we know we aren't the best firm for the engagement, or where we know we cannot do an exemplary job.

Again it comes back to seeing the company as a community that inspires loyalty and trust. If employees have a sense of pride and ownership in their company, its achievements and plans, they will get pleasure from that. It's almost impossible to overstate the importance of that – for many qualified and talented individuals, facing tempting choices, there is little point in coming to work for a company if they don't enjoy what they do.

*In addition to documenting and communicating our values, wherever possible we try to relate stories about the founders and executive team which have inspired others along the way. At away days we have scheduled sessions with the original founder of the company, where some anecdotes from Baringa's history are re-told for the benefit of more recent joiners. One example is showing pictures of the original 'shed' that, in the founder's back garden, operated as the company headquarters for the first 18 months.*

## **10. Integrity**

There is a virtuous circle of doing the right thing, attracting the right people and creating a positive place to work. But without adequate attention it's a fragile circle: trust, community, and



loyalty are hard to earn but easy to lose. None of the steps described in this white paper can be undertaken in isolation. They are all inter-connected building blocks, rather than a linear progression of tasks with a tick box for completion. If putting people at the centre of your organisation is the foundation on which all other ideas are built, then integrity is the cement that holds it all together. Integrity applies to everything an organisation does, and none of the other measures mentioned in this paper will work if it is missing.

Organisations are faced with a multitude of options and decisions every day, and it would be disingenuous to say that making necessary decisions with integrity is straightforward. We have discovered that the best way to ensure we are getting it right is to establish whether we are prepared to explain every decision we make face to face with the people affected by it. But most of all, we are happy to recruit friends and family to our organisation. That's how we know that we're getting it right.

To find out more about how to turn your organisation into a Great Place to work visit [www.baringa.com](http://www.baringa.com) or email [jim.hayward@baringa.com](mailto:jim.hayward@baringa.com).