

Behind the scenes

There is little difference between judging the Best Places to Work in Hampton Roads contest (see the special section in this week's issue) and judging the best places to work from an employee or employer standpoint. The two perspectives seem parallel in many ways:

First, people like being a part of something worthy. From the perspective of the judges, we are trying to help "raise the bar" for the Hampton Roads business community in the creation of an attractive place to work. The word attractive is intentional. Any organization that attracts the best employees and applies the best practices will likely prevail in terms of customer service and profitability. As contest judges, we are looking for a culture that sets an organization on fire with a sense of community worthiness.

Second, people like being asked their opinions. They like being given the prerogative to decide. As contest judges, we are asked to decide on many issues having to do with the way the contest is run, not just who will win the top 25 prizes. Both of these decisions are important.

The judges work to achieve the level of confidence placed in our decisions. Not that pay and benefits aren't important - these things are an imperative and often even a mandate. What is not required often sets the organization apart from the competition. Being genuinely included in the decision-making process, for example, is a hallmark of the best places to work. Employers often recognize and advance those in whom they have confidence.

Third, the judges seem to like the stability of some members of the panel having been there since the contest began. We also like the changing panel that shifts at least one panel member each year so our perspective remains fresh with new insight. Each year's contest winner serves on the subsequent year's panel.

There is a sense of purpose when the judges do meet face to face and make both individual and collective decisions. We know how much this recognition means to diligent employers and prized employees at the same time. None of us on the judging panel take our responsibilities lightly. So, as with a valued employee or employer, there is enough stability and enough stretch to nurture our curiosity and enthusiasm.

Fourth, there is the tedious task of application review and scoring. As much as we may not look forward to the intensely hard work of reading

and scoring, we also seem to learn valuable lessons from the top-notch performers every year. The panel has a diverse perspective. Rarely do each of us see all applications with the same perspective. The scores are often similar, yet there are some scores that vary considerably.

We seem to enjoy the friendly creative tension that causes one judge to argue for a particular submission while others may be swayed in their opinion. The professional atmosphere and ethical standards of those on the panel seem to draw us all down a path that ends at doing the right thing for the right reason. It's hard for us to imagine that any employer or employee wouldn't love to work in an atmosphere like that.

Fifth, for the last two years we've had the privilege of reviewing the input from employees who complete an online survey. Some respondents simply supply numbers - OK! Others take the time to tell the stories that bring their workplace to life. We look for the trends in the data, the story consistency between respondents, the scores compared to the narrative - these value-added ingredients often make the difference between being on the list and just missing it. Getting the real culture story of an organization begins for an employee on the first day of work, and for many employers continues as they probe their most valuable assets in friendly and inquiring conversations.

As judges, we've been able to learn the best practices of those who create the best places to work in Hampton Roads. I'm always keenly interested in learning about Hampton Roads from those who are part of the region. Our regional perspective is different than those from Cleveland, or Los Angeles, or even Richmond. This is a unique region and I'm personally and professionally proud to be a part of this contest, as I'm sure are all of the panel members. Congratulations to INSIDE BUSINESS for bringing this initiative to life, and to all those who earned a spot on the top 25 list.



JOSEPH J. LACROIX

Joseph J. Lacroix is the founder and president of LTI and a principal at Quality of WorkLife Consultants in Newport News. He can be reached at 591-0807 or Joe@LTODI.com.