

# CHARACTERIST: WHERE VALUES AND BOTTOMLINE MEET

## Introduction

An organisation's corporate values create the cultural context in which we work. These values define the way we work, shape our interactions with colleagues and affect the attitudes we adopt towards customers. While corporate values are often cascaded top-down, in reality, a truly effective and authentic organisational culture evolves from a two-way iterative process between management and staff:

1. Bottom up: where employees at all levels influence the corporate values through their individual beliefs and behaviours;
2. Top down: where the organisation embraces these values and which in turn influence the organisation's strategies.

The subject of our case study, Characterist LLC, is an excellent example of how an authentic corporate culture has evolved from this iterative process, resulting in strong work-life practices benefitting both the firm and staff.

## Background

*Characterist LLC (Characterist)* is a medium-sized, full-service law firm. Its roots were established in 1978 by Mr Lie Kee Pong, who founded Lie Kee Pong Partnership. In 2007, Lie Kee Pong Partnership merged with another growing law firm, Characterist LLC. Since then, *Characterist* has steadily grown into a multi-disciplinary law firm. It now has close to thirty employees - half are lawyers and the rest assume secretarial/ support positions. The majority of support staff are females while males make up majority of the lawyers. With a fairly young team, most of the lawyers are in their late 20s to 40s. Working in an industry known for its long hours and demanding job nature, it is hence encouraging to find most of the employees married with at least one child. *Characterist's* Managing Directors, Ms Lie Chin Chin and Mr Daniel Goh lead by example with four and two children respectively.

## Bottom Up: Influence of Employees' Beliefs on the Corporate Values System

Employees in *Characterist* believe that...

### Work & Family Life Hold Top Priorities

When Lee Terk Yang, a lawyer and director of *Characterist* first came on board, he was very clear that enjoying work flexibility was his top priority. As a father of three young children, he recognises the importance of his role in the family – one that goes beyond providing for the family financially. He wants to play an active role in his children's growing up years.

Working on a 4-day work week gives me much flexibility in the planning of my time. I am able to spend more time with my aged parents and also accompany them to their doctor's appointments.

Lily Lee  
Receptionist/Administrator

Hence, when Mr Lee was told at his job interview that he can enjoy flexibility in his work arrangement, it was like a dream come true. "Having flexibility means I can plan my work so that it

does not conflict with my family commitments. As long as I fulfil my requirements and produce results, there is no issue.” Mr Lee also added, “With flexibility, I have more time above the usual evenings and weekends to spend time with my children. I take them to birthday parties and drama productions where I’m often the only father there.”

### **Life Is More Than Work**

For the staff in *Characterist*, it is important to them that not only are they productive contributors at work, they should also live fulfilled lives - physically, emotionally and spiritually. Hence, we see staff involved in a myriad of activities - in sports, community service, pro-bono work, all passionately giving back to society. Mr Lee himself fulfilled his dream of playing soccer professionally, and was a football player in the Singapore League for two years!

The management believes that every staff has his/her personal set of values and beliefs. They also bring with them diverse passions, which when acknowledged and harnessed by the firm, can translate into greater engagement. *Characterist* hence embraces these passions, creating a culture and structure that result in win-win for both employees and the organisation.

‘Flexibility’ is inherent in the culture of *Characterist* and both the management and staff believe that there are other important pursuits in life beyond the workplace. Flexibility is what enables these beliefs to be lived out.

### **Top Down: Organisation Embraces Values & Makes Them Guiding Principles for Strategy**

The founders of the firm had a strong conviction about the type of corporate culture they envisioned for *Characterist*. At the same time, they openly embraced the diversity of passion that its people brought with them. What resulted then, were winning people strategies that distinguished *Characterist* from other law firms.

#### ***People Strategy #1: Talent Attraction***

Being able to attract like-minded talents who share similar values was important to *Characterist* in their expansion plans. As it turns out, flexibility is a big pull factor for potential candidates as well. Mr Lee, who helps in the recruitment of new lawyers says, “The last father we recruited was very impressed that the fixed working structure had been waived. With the flexibility, he is now able to manage his family commitments outside of work.” Mr Lee believes that the increasing trend of lawyers who value work environments that support staff holistically (in career progression and other aspects of life), positions *Characterist* as an employer of choice in the competitive legal industry.

#### ***People Strategy #2: Talent Retention***

Due to the nature of their job, support staff may not enjoy a regular telecommuting arrangement. Nevertheless, with a family culture like *Characterist’s*, their needs are not overlooked.

Mr Lee shared the case of a support staff – a consistently good worker who delivers results. For a period of time, he noticed that she consistently turned up for work 45 minutes late. Instead of

*I believe in being serious about work, yet not compromising on my quality of life. I am thankful that this firm allows me the platform to do just that. I have a degree of flexibility in my work arrangements and my boss is understanding whenever I have to attend to my personal or family matters. My work is in no way compromised. I am now happier, and am also working harder than ever.*

**Noraini Binte Omar**  
**Secretary**

focusing on her non-punctuality and dismissing her contributions, Mr Lee took the initiative to find out and understand her situation. When he realised that the long commute between home and office during the morning peak hours was causing a lot of stress, he adjusted her work hours. The staff now starts work at 10am and ends later at 7pm. This new work arrangement has proven to be a win-win for all. She is now relieved of her morning commuting stress while the firm's operations are not impacted in any way. In fact, they have gained a more committed and engaged employee in return.

### **People Strategy #3: Talent Engagement**

#### **a) Culture of Trust & Accountability**

Mr Lee stressed that the key to sustaining flexibility lies in the mindset of the Management. "What the Management values (e.g. family and faith) drives the way the firm operates." It does not mean though that quality of work is overlooked or compromised. Mr Lee emphasised that their staff are "well-worked, not over-worked" because the Management is very mindful of the resource capacity of the firm and therefore does not overstretch its resources. For flexibility to work, trust and accountability must work in tandem. While Management trusts staff to be good stewards of their time and clients, each staff is also accountable to deliver on their performance targets.

*The firm allows me and many others to arrange our work schedule without worrying about having to clock in the hours in the office just to be there.*

*As long as work gets done well and clients are satisfied, I am free to arrange my time; this allows me to schedule both family and work commitments so that neither work nor family suffers.*

*We have all heard that a happy family makes a happy worker. This could not be more true in Characterist LLC.*

**Bernard Tan**  
**Lawyer**

#### **b) Intentional Connection and Socialisation**

While face-time is not an indicator of a staff's engagement and productivity, *Characterist* sees face-time as necessary to facilitate flexibility and the smooth functioning of operations. The firm has thus structured a regular "core face-time" period for staff to meet and get updates from one another. While working on flexible work arrangements, the lawyers have a common understanding to coordinate their schedules such that at any point in time, there will be at least one senior lawyer present in the office. This ensures that support staff are able to reach a decision maker at all times. In addition, senior partners make intentional efforts to engage and connect with staff regularly – checking in on how staff are managing on both the professional and personal fronts.

#### **c) Active Involvement in Community Work**

Giving back to the community is an important theme in the fabric of *Characterist's* culture. The firm recognises that it is important to their people that they can "do good while doing well". Community

service is hence intentionally integrated into the operations of the firm. *Characterist's* lawyers are active volunteers with the Law Society of Singapore, generously sharing experiences with younger lawyers and taking on pro bono cases through the Society's Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS), as well as volunteering actively in the Society's Community Legal Clinics. Mr Lee added, "On a personal front, our heavy involvement in community work also extends to those undertaken by various churches and the TOUCH Community Services."

What started off as a simple gesture of support for staff to pursue their passion has translated into higher levels of engagement from staff and brought external accolades to the firm. *Characterist* was recently ranked second in the "Volunteer of the Year" (for mid-sized law practice) award given by the Law Society. This recognises *Characterist's* non-monetary contributions to Law Society's work and activities - a strong affirmation of the many hours the firm's lawyers have put in for pro bono cases.

### **Conclusion**

An organisation is only as good as the employees and to harness the potential of its people, it cannot ignore what drives these employees. Hence, an organisation's values and practices need to be calibrated to reflect what its employees view as critical.

*Characterist* has shown that effective work-life practices that enable employees to meet their personal and family needs outside the workplace result in successful people strategies and a productive work culture.