

Of Rewards and Rankings

By William Simpson

According to an ancient Chinese proverb, “The journey is the reward.” At Nixon Peabody LLP, we’ve learned the wisdom of these words. Being named to *Fortune* magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For[®]” list this year was a significant step in that journey and a real cause for celebration. It is a prestigious honor that puts Nixon Peabody in the company of many of our clients who also have achieved this ranking. By reflecting the success of our firm’s continuous improvement initiatives and inclusive culture, this honor has created a more positive work environment, increase in overall job satisfaction, increased productivity, and even more-enduring client relationships.

Our journey began more than 10 years ago, when our chairman, Harry Trueheart, challenged us to accomplish two goals: 1) Make Nixon Peabody the best firm to work *with*, and 2) make Nixon Peabody the best firm to work *for*. Our management team embraced the challenge and implemented an action plan. What we’ve learned along the way is far more important than the *Fortune* rank itself, and these lessons can help any organization become a better place to work.

We began by measuring employee satisfaction in 1995, and we’ve resurveyed our employees approximately every 18 months. We measure every aspect of our business – 21 different measurements that provide firm management with a wide range of metrics. As we made improvements in personnel policies, procedures, and benefit plan offerings, we saw employee satisfaction ratings improve significantly. When we knew we were on the right track toward making Nixon Peabody “The Best Firm to Work For,” we decided to enter The Great Place to Work Institute’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” competition, for an independent evaluation of our efforts.

The first year we entered, we made the first cut of 1,000 companies. That list was reduced to 400 companies, which meant we were selected to compete for the final "100 Best" list. When we compared our scores to those of the top-ranked companies, we discovered that we had missed the list by two to three percentage points in most categories. We immediately started making our management business plans and operating objectives more visible to our employees through a new chairman's newsletter and informal gatherings at brown-bag luncheons. We continued to improve our benefits package and increased our efforts in working on action items as part of our goals and objectives process to improve job satisfaction ratings. We rolled out diversity training and conducted focus-group sessions to learn more about what our employees thought about workplace issues.

We submitted our second-year entry with confidence that Nixon Peabody was an even better place to work. We didn't make the list that year, though; in fact, our overall score went down slightly. We were admittedly frustrated by that outcome, but we remained committed to our original goals and kept working on the items that our employees told us needed better results, with a focus on communications.

The outcome from these efforts paid huge dividends: Our third-year entry into The Best Places to Work competition resulted in our ranking of 49 on the 2006 "100 Best Companies to Work For" list. This recognition was special because we found ourselves in good company in the Rochester community – with Wegman's, which finished as #1 and #2, respectfully, in the past two years. We were also pleased that only six law firms in the country made the list, and we were ranked third in that group.

Participating in the entry process for the past three years has been a valuable experience. Based on our internal employee satisfaction surveys, we knew that, if we continued to address employee and client satisfaction through our business objectives, we could make Nixon Peabody "The Best Firm to Work For." We learned that the difference between "very good" and "exceptional" is razor-thin; the independent

evaluation by the Great Place to Work Institute, comparing us with the best in the United States, brought that home.

We've learned that what makes a company great to work for is constantly changing. It's an ongoing journey, with no endpoint. No matter how good you are, there's always another individual or company with a new and better idea. If you set a goal to make your organization great to work for, you must remain committed to a process of continuous improvement.

One of the most important, if surprising, findings from this experience is that making your organization a better place to work doesn't have to be expensive. Implementing some changes – most notably, the improved benefits programs – have required investment. However, many of our most important changes – in team building, recognition programs, and empowerment – have cost very little. For example, our internal surveys indicated that employee recognition was a key driver of job satisfaction. Expressions of appreciation for effort and commitment contribute significantly to higher job satisfaction levels.

The *Fortune 100* process has underscored the employee/partner strength within Nixon Peabody. We received very high ratings from *Fortune* magazine in the area of diversity. We've worked hard to create a culture of inclusion that recognizes the unique capabilities of all employees and allows them to work to their full potential.

Is there still room for improvement? Absolutely! We continually strive to improve in all areas while placing particular emphasis on making work more meaningful to our employees. We're thrilled to have made the *Fortune* "100 Best Companies to Work For" list, and we now need to sustain our progress while working on areas that offer developmental opportunities that will take us to the next level. We need to stay focused on our continuous improvement goals, not because we love awards, but because this

business strategy will make us a better law firm and a better employer. The ranking is nice, but the journey to enhancing job satisfaction at all levels is the real reward.

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