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PRACTICE PROFILE

Staffing Realities Compel Structured Shift

MFA - Moody, Famiglietti & Andronico

By Stuart Kahan

“One high profile piece of the CPA’s complex landscape is the common struggle to recruit and retain qualified talent,” says Carl Famiglietti, the managing partner of MFA – Moody, Famiglietti & Andronico, based in Tewksbury, Mass.

“Throughout the last decade, the CPA profession has been perceived as a relatively unforgiving and less than rewarding career choice: business is driven by an intense, deadline-oriented work cycle and a strict regulatory framework within which engagements are conducted.”

According to Famiglietti, these realities forced firm leaders to adopt conventional methods of alignment and accountability, including rating billable hours and full compliance as their highest priorities, with employee satisfaction a tertiary consideration.

At his firm, a structural shift in philosophy sparked a change in priorities that included a new approach to its professionals. Famiglietti points out that the result has been a significant turnaround in retention, a healthier atmosphere, improved client results, and positive growth for the overall firm.

In fact, he notes that MFA has, in the past two years, evolved from a slow growth CPA and consulting firm of under 30 employees to an organization nearly 100 strong with turnover that is far below the industry’s average.

Hallmarks of Success



Using company communications to form a deeper bond and sense of community.

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK

The reinvigoration of the firm’s culture began with a leadership change, in 2003, when Famiglietti took the reins. At that time, he says, firm perception among employees was a primary concern as turnover was running high and questions were arising as to the impact on engagements. “In addition, the competition for high-level talent was growing fiercer by the month. Acknowledging that there would be no

quick and easy fix, I decided to holistically frame a completely new vision of the environment and immediately commenced the process of execution.”

Famiglietti brought on a director of human resources who possessed experience in employee relations and operations and who, most importantly, he added, “had the intellectual and emotional capacity to align to the firm’s strategic principles.”

The two knew immediately that the most crucial element missing was communication. “Many members operated without a universal understanding of the purpose, direction, or even of the accomplishments of our firm or the individuals within it, and were often unaware of strategies or action items that were being taken. Such information was not held back intentionally; there simply seemed to be no correlated need to share it.”

But as Famiglietti notes, there was in fact a great need. “MFA members craved information and a sense of unity with the entity to which they devoted so many hours and resources every day. Today, for example, MFA issues company-wide announcements in regard to many matters, only one of which is about new client activities.”

To kick start this open atmosphere, the firm’s first step was to organize a series of town meetings to break down the longstanding communication barrier and cull ideas from the members themselves. “Leaders among the group came forward with issues they felt needed attention, and a catalog of priorities—

affectionately dubbed “The List”—was created. Leadership originated these meetings with the sole understanding that they would actively listen and would respect and understand the voices of their colleagues.”

Famiglietti readily acknowledges that some items were easily addressed. “The crunch time around April 15 obviously could not be suspended, but a more comfortable environment during stressful periods was certainly achievable. Casual dress and catered dinners (several steps up from the traditional serving of pizza and soda) were appreciated. We also went one step further and canceled Friday night catering, not out of spite but to encourage staff to simply go home.”

TIME EARNED, TIME REWARDED

To Famiglietti that simple push out the door on Friday nights raised the most important opportunity for collegial relations: a true balance between quality time at home and quality time at work. “The CPA profession is highly demanding for stretches of several months, and as professionals wade through the difficult times, they should be rewarded with time they can enjoy. Thus, while MFA’s standard benefits (retirement plans, health insurance, etc.) are well above industry standards, we also focus a great deal of our efforts on building extensive allotments of time into our culture.”

He emphasized the point that there is a major misconception in the accounting industry that such benefits are detrimental to churning out results, and that time spent away from client engagements is a waste of resources. “In truth, the reverse is detrimental: by monopolizing the time of a workforce, their identity as individuals is lost along with energy, innovation, and enthusiasm for the success of the firm.”

MFA also combined time-oriented benefits including a paid leave for sick and vacation time into one bank of PTO (Paid Time Off) that ranged up to 30 days. “This granted members a better sense of ownership over their time, allowing them to take days off without specifying a reason. To highlight the changes at hand, we went a step further by increasing the amount of time off and decreasing the amount of

MFA - Moody, Famiglietti & Andronico, LLP

Tewksbury, Mass.

Reinventing the CPA work environment

Founded: **1982**

Partners: **12**

Staff: **102**

Offices: **1**

Internet site: mfa-cpa.com

service time required to earn additional days.” Moreover, the firm closed on national holidays, increasing its observance to include 13 holidays a year.

EDUCATING IN THE EQUATION

To the people at MFA, allowing for much deserved time off is important to a relaxed state of mind, but it is only part of the equation. Education, Famiglietti notes, among members, is the essence of building a thriving organization. “Only through knowledge can innovation grow, which in turn generates better service, better results, and growth in revenues.”

As a result, the firm instituted an education budget that ranged from member to member but averaged in about \$3,000 per professional and was devoted to programs that fostered a team environment, cultivated the firm’s knowledge base, and promoted professional advancement. This included Education Week, where for one full week during the summer, MFA hosted outside speakers on topics ranging from new auditing approaches to etiquette classes. Client work was still addressed, but the extremely high attendance to all events was evidence of the value of the program.

Next, Famiglietti says, the firm added excitement to education by bringing its full staff to a team building exercise at the New England Patriots facility at Gillette Stadium. “Select players and coaches were on hand to delve into their commitment to operating as a cohesive unit.”

There is also “The Breakfast Club,” where each of MFA’s 11 partners takes three professionals to breakfast each month. It provides an open agenda to discuss any topics that might come to the fore, without

limiting the discussion to work issues.

Furthermore, MFA dedicated a six-figure budget to recruitment and retention. There are \$100 holiday gifts for each employee, life event recognition gifts for new parents, consolations for illness or death of family members, and birthday gift certificates.

REAPING THE BENEFITS

According to Famiglietti, the new initiatives have had a tremendous impact, with each requiring various levels of thought, energy, and implementation strategy. “Given the extent of continuous changes needed, it required nearly all four years since the leadership change to build what is now a naturally trusting, innovative, and communicative atmosphere. The process is somewhat akin to turning a battleship, with each stimulus calling for a corresponding reaction: great fortitude, patience, and conviction has been and continues to be required to see the vision through to its completed reality.”

He points out that in order for management to elevate their model through these collective actions, they committed to balancing three equal constituencies at all times: the firm’s client companies, members of the firm (each a colleague without exception and without regard to titles), and the business itself. “Even as some traditionalists called for setting aside change and staying the course, by keeping these three critical elements in mind, resistance would over time evolve into a new and more supportive energy.”

Famiglietti concludes that building a great place to work is not simply an exercise in making its members happy. On the contrary, he considers it a critical business initiative that has spurred ingenuity and growth. “As a set of mere tactical implementations, the effort would not have achieved its intended result. To change the firm required a steadfast belief in the potential connectivity that could be inspired between individuals. As synapses fire collaboratively and toward a greater cause, so a relaxed, team-oriented culture can better sustain the firm’s competitive ability.” **PA**



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