A Short Story On How THE One Creates A Better World Through Its Organizational Culture

It’s all about People, Profit, Planet.
Take a seat, silence the phone and grab some popcorn. This is one show you do not want to miss.

The Backstory
Organizational culture has historically been considered soft and in a sense too hard to measure. What does having a great work environment do to bring in customers, new business and strategic growth anyway? This very question is what Great Place To Work® Institute has been researching for over 20 years in 45 countries including now in the UAE.

Even though times and business trends change, people’s basic feelings remain. The research has consistently shown that feeling is the root of all decision-making whether you are a CEO or an employee.

Trust goes on to secure long-term relationships forming the foundations of almost every business alliance. Fueling these critical relationships with meaning is the effect of simple disciplines such as respect, camaraderie, transparency and the feeling of being valued.

Great Place To Work® would hence like to exhibit a panoramic view of a special company called THE One that places feelings on the top of its game plan. This is a once upon a time never-ending story, the journey of which will hopefully inspire a beginning of another.

Prelude
THE One Total Home Experience is a home fashion chain, a rather unique brand that was born and bred in the United Arab Emirates, the heart of the Middle East. While it’s first Theatre, as they like to call it opened in Abu Dhabi in 1996, it has been growing ever since. THE One does not just sell exclusive, high quality, ethically sourced furniture, but they sell Feelings.

As you absorb the true essence of this story we envisage that you will feel the soul of THE One – the ideologies around

Mubeena Mohammed is Senior Consultant at Great Place To Work®, UAE.

Ravi Singh is Head of Talent Relations at THE One Total Home Experience, UAE.
why this company proudly claims to sell Feelings rather than mere products, branding their outlets as Theatres and their customers as Fans.

Looking through the lens, you will see why THE One is one of a kind, magical, dynamic, vibrant and full of raw energy. It fuels excitement and creates the crisp, emotional, happy environment that runs parallel to their distinctive business model.

Their employees are part of one big Tribe dedicated to making the world a better place through their Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) initiatives. They expect all their Tribe members to live by their core values: Love, Live, Dare, and Believe, local community and the planet – They call it THE One Tribe, THE One Voice and THE One Goal.

Synopsis

The main storyline involves UAE based home fashion chain THE One having to deliberately create a workplace culture that aligns people’s hearts to transform the world. THE One’s company culture is ingeniously showcased in all the brand’s locations across the GCC, a backdrop where the plot gets its element of contrast. Practices related to talent sourcing, personnel development, performance management, SRI, rewards and bottom line results form the major storylines across their Theatres in the UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and Lebanon with an upcoming premiere in Tunisia. All with the aim of having their employees experience the best work life imaginable while supporting the building of a better world.

The plot thickens when a global consulting organization called Great Place to Work® comes knocking on their door in 2010. Their mission: to improve society by transforming workplaces and to recognize great workplace cultures in business publications in over 45 countries. THE One and Great Place to Work® connect with incredible synergy, leveraging their common vision of global transformation and the value of great workplaces.

Great Place to Work® has awarded THE One with the honor of being one of the ‘Top Companies to Work For’ in the UAE in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The Company has moved up the ranks each year and has received additional trophies for creating growth platforms for women and the millennial generation. Exceptional workplace practices and high scores on the Trust Index® survey is evidence of this authentic fact: THE One Tribe is coached to perform for their Fans with the type of company vision that paints a higher purpose as their backdrop. THE One story can attribute its long running success to an amazing cast and crew backstage. The brand continues to garner rave reviews and receive awards from Great Place to Work®.

Welcome to THE One Total Home Experience where 17 years and 15 Theatres later, workplace culture plays a prominent role in the company’s performance every single day and all Fans get to be in the front row. THE One’s story promises to be a magical, musical and meaningful experience. Its playbill reads of a central theme unlike any other – Does the world really need another retailer? No, we need a better world. Here’s your free ticket to THE One performing ‘We Are a Great Workplace’ in five Acts.

Enjoy the show!
Act One.
The Law of Attraction.

The stage is set for the story’s workplace culture success. The first scene plays on the fact that attracting and retaining talent is achieved fastest by applying great workplace practices. THE One place people as their topmost priority in all business decisions – from strategic planning to execution of actions, people play the most vital role in promoting the brand globally.

There are four key fundamental practices highlighted at the THE One which may not be a norm in our part of the world: hire the best who fit and enhance the brand’s culture, pay well and fairly regardless of nationality, train to achieve their own personal best and demand the funkiest ideas for the company. Each of these principles are subplots in their own right that justify THE One’s main message. The Company makes it clear that their culture is not for those who don’t dare to believe.

Selecting people who fit in is significantly important for the success of the brand. Nationality does not have value when deciding Tribe members’ compensation plans which is undeniably a breakthrough policy in this region. Training and Development at THE One is targeted and needs based, strictly opposing the common regional practice of sending only an elite group to attend courses. And last but not least, the company is one of a handful of few in the Middle East that requires people to generate funky, crazy, risky ideas openly in a safe environment.

Great workplaces consistently attract top talent and have above average retention rates. People don’t leave THE One very often and those that do regularly ask for their old jobs back. So what is the secret to the company’s boomerang effect with less than 10% annual employee turnover? A part of this answer lies in how the company’s Producers and Directors recruit their cast of characters. In a region where employee retention has been at a crisis point for decades, THE One reverses this trend by managing the employee experience from recruitment, right through to career progression. Even after leaving, it appears that the flag of THE One’s values is still held high by former employees, who frequently relate their stories, experiences and knowledge, singing praises of THE One to the global community.

The casting directors of THE One are leaders who think proactively, believe differently and act boldly. THE One has a mix of right and left brained characters, humor, imagination and a kind of rebellion that is undeniably contagious. The company screens and shortlists candidates for cultural fit prior to assessing technical or job abilities – a system that maintains the company culture and is consistently applied across all their locations in the GCC. One of the hallmarks of a great workplace according to research by Great Place to Work® is that it has hiring practices to ascertain whether a prospective employee’s values, attitudes and personality closely correspond to corporate values, beliefs and actions. The process of positive scrutiny of any aspiring cast member to ensure harmony with the rhythm of the company is a strong attribute of THE One.

THE One specifically looks for passion, empathy and commitment by assessing candidates holistically. They do this to ensure the right actors are cast and look for team players that want to belong rather than just play their part and do the job. A lengthy conversation not only probes previous job experiences but also life before work and how the interest in the job was generated throughout their career. Selection tools are designed such that a gestalt picture of the person is painted. Leaders then decide whether the audition fits THE One’s philosophies and if the actor has the desire to be different.

All this drama begs the question of whether this process is really any different to how other companies in the UAE recruit talent. As this story unfolds, it becomes clear that, while companies in the region recruit for the present, THE One recruits for the future - an interesting concept and catalyst for change, which is strategically aligned to THE One’s big hairy scary goal for 2020: 99 theatre stores that will support 99 villages. The brand does this, not only to maintain business continuity, but also to carry the hope of a better world through its values into the future.

Even though business operations may change long-term, changing the world is a constant goal for THE One Tribe.
Act Two.
The Power of Performance.

The collaboration with Great Place to Work® has helped THE One to refine its practices and processes since 2011. Commentary by employees revealed that the company’s core values and the skills gained from work helps them significantly in their personal life and growth. To keep this light of growth going, THE One introduced a new and improved Health and Performance Management System - a formally structured tool that emphasizes on-the-job training, individual achievements and personalized character development.

Health refers to the soft values displayed during both internal and external audience interactions. These core values include: Love - to show respect, encourage and forgive; Live - to be positive, question and be significant; Dare - to be accountable, truthful and open minded and Believe - to show commitment, be loyal and share the culture of the company through storytelling. To ensure that THE One upholds its core values, each member of the Tribe is appraised twice annually on Health and Performance measures.

These core values are ingrained in each cast member as they are expected to live by them, and form the basis for creating and maintaining company culture. To ensure that the balance between soft and hard skills are equally sustained the performance of each cast member is also rated.

In 2011 there have been forty-five team members who have been promoted internally to take on new roles within the company. In 2012, an additional sixty-five employees were promoted within the company.

The Great Place To Work® Model® insists that a performance management process is not a significant factor in great workplaces. In fact performance management is feared and viewed as unfair and a chore at best in most organizations across the UAE. Managing performance ironically has never made employees feel better about themselves as contributing individuals. But rarely has a performance management system been revised and edited specifically as a result of employee feedback on a survey, which occurred at THE One.

THE One would argue that its Health and Performance Management system has actually enhanced the Tribe’s perception about their workplace. The dialogue with Great Place To Work® continues in this area and the argument reaches a crescendo on the business stage about the relevance of a performance management framework to workplace culture. The audience is left to decide, opine and imagine.

THE One is a uniquely exemplary workplace in the region, if not in the world. Its dedication to providing every Tribe member an opportunity for career growth rather than just a job proves how fundamentally different this company conducts itself. Most organizations in the UAE offer the promise of job stability and an income. However, the art direction in this show is the reason why employees at THE One take on their roles genuinely, making characters come to life during the company’s business performance.

Talent management practices at THE One are considered close to 5-star by Great Place to Work® as the brand stands in bold contrast to the prevailing market. As soon as the company raises its curtains to new cast and crew, they find virtually no favoritism in promotions, a whole lot of cross-functional training experience and a surprisingly open 360 degree feedback model where everyone is encouraged to speak up, share their thoughts, feelings and opinions be it favorable or dissenting.

Great Place to Work® looks for organizations that foster a learning environment which allows employees to discover and nurture their talents and interests. Personalized development plans, cross-divisional learning, promotions from within, management programs for non-managers and mentoring are not merely seasonal fads at THE One but critical business policies. The company’s training strategy focuses on retaining and expanding internal expertise and providing employees with the tools they need to be freely creative in the workplace without fear of backlash.

Scenes like these are rarely conceived of, let alone enacted in our part of the world.
Great Place to Work® has been researching the best in workplace excellence for over 20 years the world over and awarding exceptional performers across the Americas, Europe, Asia and now the Middle East.

In 2013 the Institute awarded THE One Total Home Experience the No. 4 spot on the UAE’s ‘Top Companies To Work For’ list and also recognized the company for being one of the top workplaces for women and young people under the age of 25.

In addition by virtue of THE One’s programs such as Challenged Employees, Local Volunteering and Ethical Sourcing this show has already set a regional benchmark, sure to smash box office records wherever Theatres happen to open next.

Act Three. The Awards Show.

So what rewards are in place at THE One to ensure that its production values are backed up with stellar performances? The reward is sometimes material of course but like their brand promise to Fans, this organization rewards with Feelings. The Feelings of making a real difference in their daily job when revenue from sales go toward building schools in India or empowering the less privileged in Kenya.

The ultimate reward of a better world could take time, effort and resources that not all of us might live to witness. But THE One’s Celebration and Reward Program recognizes outstanding work along the way. The program was created in response to feedback from Great Place to Work® assessment tools. Employees asked for a formalized program to acknowledge stellar performances by individual stars.

Formal awards are handed out to Stars of the Month and Core Value Ambassadors while length of service award recipients receive extra leave days and get to be on the company’s Hall of Fame for eternity.

The Rewards and Celebration program at THE One has been an instant hit, making it a significant tool for maintaining organizational culture. Celebrations begin with a Kick Off, an annual event designed to get everyone inspired, motivated and on one page through team-building workshops, presentations and off-the-wall group activities, before concluding with THE One Store and Company Achievement Rewards (TOSCAR) gala dinner. The Breakfast Bash in every Theatre and associated business units on the first Sunday of every month follows throughout the year.

Celebratory communication at THE One does not stop here. WOW stories are shared, Tribe members have direct access to their CEO (Chief Emotional Originator), and the dozens of channels offered in the form of Training Days, an internal publication called Training Times, a Buddy from THE Office dedicated to each Theatre who visits them twice a month, and institutionalized focus group meetings for pulse checks are just a few of the avenues for communication and celebration. From individual appreciation in morning huddles to beach parties and evenings with the CEO the program offers every person an opportunity to be appreciated.

As reviewed by Great Place to Work®, this program exceeds all the criteria of a world-class practice with an added X factor. It is original with its own brand stamp; all inclusive, meaning everyone can benefit regardless of position; has variety in terms of the number of platforms through which cast members can get unlimited fame; is integrated into business success and other talent relations policies; and every process in the program is embedded with a personal human touch. THE One stands firm on the fact that people play the most important role in the brand’s success.
Act Four.

Impact on Society.

The term ‘CSR’ has not tickled THE One’s fancy. The Producers dislike the ‘Corporate’ emphasis of the acronym and feel that the word ‘Responsibility’ makes it sound like hard work.

Using THE Oneology dictum called SRI, (Socially Responsible Investment) instead has become part of their script. The show’s lead protagonist, a visionary player by Thomas Lundgren, who pioneered this brave idea, calls himself the company’s Chief Emotional Originator. What better than a feel good ending? Or should we say beginning?

THE One has received 10 CSR awards since 2006 in recognition of their SRI programs, which includes THE Onederworld.

Kicked off in August 2008 the first Onederworld project in the Pimbienit community in Kenya is a strategic 5-year plan towards holistic community development with education as its heart. Since 2008, THE One has funded the building of nine classrooms of a new Primary school, a library, school kitchen and latrine blocks, besides providing the Pimbienit community with clean running water by drilling a borehole in September 2011. In 2012 they launched two new Onederworld projects, this time in India, demonstrating their commitment to doing business for a higher purpose.

THE One’s public blog www.theonederworld.com and social media sites testify to the progress the company is making in global community development through video reports the audience can access and comment on.

All of this may seem like a normal business practice to the rest of the world, but perhaps the showstopper is THE One’s involvement with the local and global community through their Challenged Employee Program.

Great Place to Work® has not yet come across an organization in the UAE that actively recruits, trains and supports special needs employees providing them with opportunities to integrate into society while contributing fully to the workplace and earning an income.

Interestingly, THE One aims to hire and retain 5% of challenged employees. At present, the company has a total of 17 employees (2.62% of the workforce) who are either mentally or physically challenged. Their families and guardians are constantly updated on their progress, creating a special bond between the company and the family. Whilst each challenged employee is different, bringing diversity to the organization, they are all treated with respect and provided the tools to learn and grow at their own pace.

The company’s practices around SRI aim to show employees the value of their work and the effect it has on the underprivileged. This has also proven to impact customer behavior, eliciting a sense of Doing Good by purchasing Ethically Sourced products. They have a vested interest in being able to help make the world a better place.

Based on employee improvisations expressed on 2011’s Great Place to Work® survey of ‘changing the world together’, year 2012 saw THE One zoom its lens on Local Volunteering. Upon successful completion of a volunteering campaign the team is rewarded with a fun team-building event. THE One loves to celebrate much like the after-party of a successful run of screenings where brilliant cinematography is showcased in slow-motion to recall an all-round inspiring performance by the cast and crew.

The key question asked by THE One is: “What if we could involve all our staff, suppliers and customers in a higher purpose, rather than just selling and buying stuff no one really needs?” Most business models are based on turning things that people don’t necessarily need into things that people should want and buy.
Great Place To Work® United Arab Emirates

As a social and business enterprise THE One has made it their responsibility to improve the world for future generations. This is a cultural mindset ingrained in all cast members who are aware of their responsibilities as change agents, a by-product of staying true to their character in each and every performance.

The ability to orchestrate a 650-strong cast list to articulate the visions of THE One with character sketches that are groomed within is a tremendous effort and an unusually rare art form. Fulfilled employees increase the probability of happier customers, with higher sales and profitability. In turn this means more challenged employees plus more communities benefiting from the brand’s Local Volunteering and Ethical Sourcing initiatives. It is all about People, Profit and Planet. No one is to be left out of the fun if they want to experience the freedom of belonging and contributing to co-creating a better world.

Act Five.
The Bottom-Line Story

Do all these amazing practices translate into customers buying more? Does it increase employee productivity, cost control and the company’s bottom line? The show has been extremely entertaining so far with dialogues, choreography, art direction and genuine performances, but after the applause, what’s in it for the Fans, the cast and the visionary Producer? Will people come back to experience it again and again? Get ready for the climax of the show.

It’s pretty simple according to THE One. Better people practices and a one-of-a-kind work culture gets to the heart of business – the value of customers. What’s in it for the Fans? Customer behavior is altered when they witness a Theatre where the ensemble cast works as one with a higher purpose; Whether it be their experience with a challenged employee, participating in the Local Volunteering event or the feel good factor of Ethically Sourced products.

What’s in it for cast members? Besides the privilege of engaging in a higher purpose of ‘Change the World’ as part of their daily job? An exceptional workplace culture that respects their individuality yet has a family feel. The result is that they pay it forward by delivering their best performance and never stop rehearsing, hence get better at what they do every day. This is the kind of vicious cycle that’s desperately needed in the business world of the Middle East.

What’s in it for the technical crew and backstage managers? A plethora of success, ranging from satisfied employees to satisfied customers – a holistic view! Instead of having to motivate cast members, managers can focus on inspiring them through engagement and rewards.

When a member of the Tribe steps up the ladder and onto a new career stage, the entire cast rejoices. The sound of admiration and excitement flows through the company like a good old story line, capturing the audience’s interest - a phenomenon so rare it is unbelievable that this could actually happen so effortlessly. A 90% employee retention rate of the best talent the region has to offer and them singing hymns of THE One’s practices even after they leave, is a testament to the long-running success of this show.

What’s in it for the Producer? While the recession made THE One sharper on its spending and budgeting appropriations, the analysis from the Great Place to Work® Trust Index® Survey had re-ignited awareness, shifting the value of people and organizational culture at work to a strategic platform. People performance is measured in a transparent way that is not threatening and training is given on the condition that Tribe members have adequately demonstrated work ethic, attitude and the will to improve key skills and gain knowledge to Doing Good.

Sourcing the right people for cultural fit, reinstating rewards that staff requested before the recession hit, linking performance ratings to how the staff have impacted the community have inspired employees to work from the heart, with their souls singing. A fantastic musical produced by a 650 strong choir, who proudly stand united to achieve the vision of THE One.

To create a GREAT PLACE TO WORK®, managers must build TRUST by practicing CREDIBILITY, RESPECT and FAIRNESS...and they must encourage PRIDE and CAMARADERIE.
Talk of a Sequel.

What’s next in this success story? The challenges of maintaining a world-class company culture are many, as it doesn’t just run by itself. One day the Producer might step up to explore other possibilities but the show will have to go on.

THE One has already started thinking ahead and now resolves to train all senior cast members in its culture and how to cascade it down to their teams. Managing people through futuristic succession planning and maintaining THE One value system of feelings and expression will henceforth be part of senior leaders performance requirements. Maintaining the spirit of THE One in its higher purpose of creating a better world will hopefully ensure that this unique culture remains and grows inspiring the rest of the region to become social enterprises too.

THE One is an exemplary company that stands by its mission to change the world and actively sketches characters that want to be part of its raison d’etre. You will want to be seated even as the credits roll because this is currently the biggest picture show being screened all over the Middle East – THE One, A Great Place To Work®!