

Learning from WE

The Art and Science of Creating a Mission-Driven Culture

By Colleen Clark, Head of Optimistic People, Life is Good

Profit with a Purpose

“Life is Good.” It’s more than a statement: It’s our organization’s brand, mission and offering, summed up in three words. From our Boston HQ, we deliver optimistic, inspiring messages through original art shared on wearable “canvasses” including t-shirts, hats and mugs sold through our e-commerce store (www.lifeisgood.com). We donate 10% of our net profits to the Life is Good Kids Foundation, our non-profit organization serving children in need in the US and Haiti. Our brand is a statement, a call to presence and a belief system that permeates our workplace. Our mission – to spread the power of optimism – is a pebble dropped into our culture, rippling through every family and community we touch.

As Head of Optimistic People for this mission-driven brand, I get to help integrate our brand and our social mission. And while the message is simple, bringing it to life in our workplace is a mix of exhilarating success, mind-boggling challenge and everything in between. With two unique workplaces in two states, our founders on-site, and space shared by a non-profit and multi-generational employees, our days are full of authentic collaboration and conflict. I love it all, and every day I have the privilege of being humble, curious and a constant student. Thanks to my decades of business experience, I’m well-prepared for half this challenge. But, while I’ve served as a volunteer for several iconic non-profit organizations, this is my first exposure to integrating the for-profit and non-profit organizations. To help move our organization’s culture forward with our people, I knew I would need to do some research.

Since there aren't many organizations with this integrated model, I decided to return to my roots as a passionate volunteer with WE. Founded more than 20 years ago by a group of 12-year-old volunteers, WE is now a powerhouse in the social purpose space, with a charity operating on four continents and a social enterprise that sells socially conscious retail products and experiences to fund the charity. They were exactly the source of guidance I needed.

Since 1995, WE has led the quest to change the world through changing the lives of children across the globe. My connection with the organization goes back to 2007, when I worked with their first HR team, through "talent wrangling" at stadium-sized WE Day youth events in two countries. For me, those volunteer experiences have been gifts that keep coming back. When I reconnected with my friends at the WE organization in Toronto recently, I was inspired by what I learned from them about integrating brand culture into the workplace – and about how doing good starts with good people and great people practices.

Connecting your people with your purpose

Although our two organizations are quite different, the connections between them are surprisingly relevant: Each of us is passionate about connecting our people with our purpose. From its beginnings as a youth-led startup, WE has cracked the code for finding, and keeping, the best employees for their mission-driven organization. They've become experts at engaging talent spanning multiple generations and, particularly, Millennials and Gen Z. And they do this in the most authentic ways possible – for example, educating volunteer youth about how they can rise above their own life struggles and make a difference in the lives of their peers in developing communities, *while they are still children*.

If you're not familiar with WE, here's an appetizer:

- *WE is a youth empowerment organization headquartered in Toronto, with offices across North America and in the United Kingdom.*
- *Launched in 1995 as a group of 12-year-old volunteers working out of a family basement in Thornhill, Ontario.*
- *Now: 1,000+ employees internationally, with a charity operating on four continents and a social enterprise that sells socially conscious retail products and experiences to fund the charity.*
- *WE's sustainable development initiatives are carried out, with co-operation of the community members, in nine regions internationally, including Kenya, India, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti and rural China.*
- *WE Day is a stadium-sized celebration of the power of youth to make positive impacts locally and globally, and it takes place annually in 17 cities across the United States, Canada, the UK and the Caribbean. The young people who attend WE Day must earn their way there through their acts of social good.*

All of that is prelude to what they do best: They give the priceless and life-changing gifts of perspective, gratitude and selflessness. I know this because I saw it happen in the most personal way possible.

Finding WE: My connection

More than a decade ago, I got my first taste of work that gives back; it prepared me for the unique career change that would eventually lead me to Life is Good.

I was a single, middle-class mom attempting to raise my spirited 14-year-old son, Frisco. Karma brought us face-to-face with Craig Kielburger, the co-founder of WE, who challenged Frisco to become a leader, to fundraise and volunteer. Since that encounter with Craig, Frisco has met children from all over the world and built schools in rural Kenya, Ecuador and India. He is among the 84% of WE youth participants who believe they can make a positive impact on society.

Does it matter? You decide. After earning his MS in Conflict Resolution from Columbia, Frisco has chosen to give back through his work as a Guidance Counselor / Student Advocate at a "last chance" school in Brooklyn. He has a deep passion for social justice and an evolving world view. In his teen years, inspired by his encounter with Craig and new connection with the mission of WE, he gave up sports and summer fun, working long days in the remote villages where he and other youth would build schools from the ground up. He carries in his heart the gratitude he feels for these experiences. He credits WE with his empathy, perspective and capacity for joy. And now every student he guides will benefit from the magic of WE.

My gratitude for the change I saw in my son led me to volunteer with WE myself, just as the organization was beginning to focus on strengthening their HR people practices in 2007. The WE team was growing fast and that comes with growing pains. They were committed to building a strong foundation in talent and performance management and sought outside help from HR leaders.

Working with the Toronto-based team, we focused on infusing core HR practices (talent selection, orientation, training and evaluation) with the vision and mission of WE. While I feel I contributed something meaningful at the time, I'm delighted to find how much I can learn today from how WE has grown and now leads in their people practices.

The Science of WE: Measurable impact on the employee, community and the world

Imagine my surprise to discover that some of the people I had met during my volunteer days a decade ago are now leading the organization. Evidently, they haven't lost an ounce of their youthful passion for making a difference. The same is true for those who have moved on to roles outside the organization, whose testimonials you can read here.

<https://www.we.org/careers/alumni/>

Capturing the stories of alumni is the first idea I'll "borrow" from WE. Authenticity is a Superpower at Life is Good, and inspiration shared by the employees themselves is a compelling, direct message.

Like WE, Life is Good is focused on attracting talented, smart, curious people who are passionate about work with a social mission, and who bring the hard and soft skills needed to make our business succeed. It's a tall order. We find that while we attract the right talent, some require the significant support structures they experienced at larger companies, which are beyond our current size and scope. It was encouraging to discover WE is run by head-level managers with 10+ years of experience in their fields – business development, partner relations, marketing – some of whom have grown with the organization, others hired from outside to complement the internal depth of cultural knowledge. Together, they lead and mentor younger, less-experienced but equally passionate staff.

All senior leaders, whether heading social-purpose start-ups or iconic Fortune 500s – could learn from WE’s carefully crafted successes through each phase of growth. From providing staff housing in its early years, which allowed new university graduates to affordably live and work in a large urban center, to trusting young, emerging leaders with significant responsibility, WE took the right cultural leaps of faith.

Strategic focus on culture

Life is Good is now approximately the same size as WE was when that organization rounded the curve from start-up to fast growth. So I look to what WE did during that stage in their development for guidance on bringing our brand and social mission into our workplace.

What I’ve learned from WE are "look in the mirror" questions any conscious organization can ask to get to the important strategic truths that form your unique path to the future:

- How do we manage the constant tension between choosing to invest finite resources into products and services vs infrastructures and systems for employees?
- What are the right investments to make at each stage of our growth?
- How can we always strive to better care for our employees, even as our growth means we will feel less like a tribe and more like a large community bound by purpose?

The answers WE found are different from what Life is Good will discover, and different from what your organization will discover. What matters is we have the courage and take the time to ask, then act on the answers. WE took measurable action and it led to impressive results:

- WE has employed more than 2,200 people over 20+ years.
- Today, a staggering 80% indicate they plan to stay with WE for the foreseeable future, 91% are personally connected to the organization’s mission, and an even more impressive 98% believe they are making a positive change in the world through their work.
- These numbers are well out of reach for most organizations (source: Gallup).

The highly-respected Gallup organization shared this news earlier this year:

Over nearly two decades, the annual percentage of engaged U.S. workers has ranged from a low of 26% in 2000 and 2005 to the recent six-month high of 34% in 2018. On average, 30% of employees have been engaged at work during the past 18 years.

Somehow, WE has found a way to more than double our highest engagement numbers. They didn't do it by focusing on their numbers. Engagement begins with the DNA of the mission.

Millennials want meaning

Encouraged to find another similarity between Life is Good and WE:

"WE's staff, like most social impact organizations, is young. Over 75 percent of WE's North American staff are millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996). In my opinion, working with this group can be complex. The characteristics of millennial employees are often lampooned in the media and are generally oversimplified. But there are well-documented traits of this generation that can make them challenging for employers to retain and manage. Millennials have a strong tendency to "job hop", averaging almost 3 jobs in their first five years after graduation. By comparison, millennials' predecessors, Generation X, averaged two jobs in their first ten years after college. They also have big ambitions for promotions and salary, with 40 percent of millennials expecting a promotion or a pay raise every year. Those are daunting statistics for an employer." -- Dr. David Baum, organizational psychologist and corporate consultant

The optimist in me reads statements like these and, aided by observations from the Life is Good team, sees the opportunity. Passionate young leaders often leave because they see no meaning in the work they do, not solely because they are seeking the next raise or title bump. They crave authenticity, compassion and genuine enrichment – body, mind and soul. The common thread in the cultural tapestry comes to mind: Takers eat well. Givers sleep well.

Like WE, at Life is Good, our Millennials stay twice as long as the statistics tell us they should. WE and Life is Good deliver a unique promise to a generation seeking meaning. Perfect? Not even close. Learning? Always.

The invisible paycheck

Attracting talent in from large, well-known brands and corporations can be discouraging. When you're committed to investing in your purpose and growing the good your organization delivers, payroll and perks may not be enough. At Life is Good, while our salaries are above market for every role, we rely on "the invisible paycheck" to attract like-minded leaders. Working in beautiful surroundings full of opportunities for music, art, wellness, education and self-expression are givens for both Life is Good and WE. Sadly, many employees don't realize just how important these intangibles become until after they leave. This may explain the healthy number of "boomerangs" – people who leave then quickly return – in both organizations.

This partial list of WE perks and positives has inspired me to re-think how we bring our mission to life at work.

Wellness perks

- Onsite in-office yoga, aerobics, wellness and meditation classes and a fully stocked gym at the WE headquarters
- Free physiotherapy sessions in a private space physiotherapy room within the gym
- Free external gym memberships at GoodLife, Energie Cardio and 24-Hour Fitness
- Bike parking in-office, and showers in-office

- Employee Assistance Program offers mental health, wellness and work-life balance services
- Suite of healthcare benefits at no cost to employees
- Headquarters are fully accessible and mindfully designed with 32 microclimates for optimal comfort and energy efficiency; and environmentally conscious fittings including filtered water dispensers on every floor, and carpeting manufactured from reclaimed fishing nets
- Part-time barista serves free sustainably grown coffee for staff and visitors
- Days off / recovery days post-travel (and post-execution of stadium-sized WE Day shows organized by the charity)
- Healthy meal and snack options at staff retreats and other functions
- Option to work from home or remotely
- Extra day off on your birthday and whole-office shutdown over the winter holiday

Professional development and communication perks

- Onboarding program ensures new hires get a solid start – especially important in an organization that gives so many new college graduates their first full-time jobs
- Each staff member follows an individualized Growth and Success Plan they have developed with their direct manager. People managers receive mandatory training on how to give effective feedback, assess performance and have tough but important conversations with staff. Aligned on what their work priorities are, staff have the tools to be successful
- Professional Development fund, for which all staff can apply after one year of employment, offers \$500 toward outside training
- Technology in WE's Toronto headquarters makes it possible to capture and disseminate professional development sessions and share throughout the organization, assisting with staff experience in regional offices
- Incubator program gives staff the opportunity to mentor young non-profit leaders in the community
- Biennial Staff Trips offer global travel experience for all employees (and a guest) from all departments the chance to visit ME to WE immersive travel destinations in Kenya, India and Ecuador (a \$5,000 value per participant). While enjoying unique global travel, staff get to see up close the impact WE has made in developing communities

Measure what matters

If you're going to be outstanding, you can't stand for everything. Resist the temptation to make the easily measurable matter and, instead, find a way to measure what matters. Discern, with great care, what motivates the talent you attract. Learn to spot and avoid those who are hungry for a higher rung on the ladder and a more impressive title. Wait for the few who crave meaning.

Be mindful this is a strategic choice. It means you'll be saying "no" to a lot of compelling people and talent options. It means you're going to encounter some strong opinions about how you should run your organization. Don't let that deter you. Your detractors are proof you are staying the course.

Alternatively, if you focus just on the art of social purpose, you'll miss the rich story you get to tell when your numbers break the pattern. Of the many impressive metrics WE has achieved, these stand out:

90 percent of staff say they are connected to our organization's mission and 96 percent believe we are making a difference in the world.

Imagine the transformation we would see in our workplaces if all employees felt this conviction.

At Life is Good, we believe that what you focus on grows. If your organization focuses on just the science of retention and lives by those numbers, you'll miss the reason the numbers matter. You'll get more metrics. Some may make you feel good, others will take you down the path of competing with employers who have only dollars to offer. Know which numbers matter to your organization.

Follow your North Star

Twenty-five years ago, it wasn't trendy to found a non-profit organization. Around that time, two sets of brothers – Bert and John Jacobs of Life is Good, and Craig and Mark Kielburger of WE – began their journey of change. They were leading in the most real sense: No one had done what they were about to do. The lesson? Listen to your "why" and trust your purpose. This isn't for everyone.

Believe in the power of your mission to attract the right people for the right reasons. When those people find their tribe with your organization, they will know they belong. Listen to them, care for them with more than money and titles. They can get the trappings of success in other companies who have only those cards to play in the game of talent. Always let them know they matter – to your brand, to your social cause and to the world.

Strengthen through sharing

In addition to learning more about how I can help strengthen the culture of Life is Good, I discovered the reason I wrote this article. While the missions, values and locations of your organization and mine vary, I'm convinced we have more in common than not. We, the builders of brands, businesses and organizations need one another. Together, we form strong circle of good, created by many hands across many generations with one shared belief: we can make a difference.

In sharing our knowledge about how best to grow, by bucking the trends and serving the employees who strive to serve others, we increase our collective power to do good, whether we do it by spreading the power of optimism or creating a movement to make the world a better place.