Creating a Winning Culture

>> **BY MIKE GEORGE**

How the CEO of startup insurer Trisura is personally perpetuating his company's value system

Our business goes home on the elevators every night, and the most critical reason for our success since we started Trisura seven years ago is the dedication and ability of our 75 employees. We appreciate the excellent relationships they have forged with our broker customers, and the competitive edge it provides us.

Trisura is a specialty lines insurer with six offices across the country and focused on surety, corporate risk and warranty programs business, with a vision of being "a step above." We expect to write close to $80 million in 2013 and have been growing roughly 30% annually in a flat, soft market, while posting a strong bottom line for the past several years.

We have grown rapidly, with dozens of new recruits over that period, and face the same challenges most companies do in terms of having these new employees buy into and adopt our culture, and choose to stay with us over the long run. We have enjoyed low employee turnover, in part because we feel we invest heavily in developing our people.

In fact, Trisura staff have also invested heavily in Trisura, as 33 employee shareholders combine to hold 40% of company ownership in partnership with Brookfield. This helps us with motivation and retention. However, we know we must go further.

Most Valuable Program

Our unique employee development program is called MVP: Mentoring Our Values and Principles. Trisura's value proposition is focused on delivering exceptional experiences to our brokers. We have outlined 10 core values that we believe should define the experience stakeholders have in their dealings with us. These include caring about the needs of the broker and their customer, and being fast, decisive and supportive, to name a few. Our values help define to our employees what is expected of them in their roles. Further, we have established a set of 13 guiding principles that provide our staff with a roadmap in terms of how we operate and build our business.

Most companies have vision and mission statements and value propositions, but few do a good job of sharing them and ensuring everyone in the company lives them. This is a big part of MVP. We bring 10 to 12 of our newer staff, from all areas of the company and with a few years' experience, together in Toronto for six days of training, comprised of two three-day sessions about six months apart. One full day is dedicated to our values and principles and discussing the actions and behaviours that define Trisura's culture, and I run that session myself.

We believe we do a decent job as an organization transferring knowledge for technical skills through on-the-job mentoring by linking our less experienced staff with industry veterans. However, most of these employees have not had training in the "softer" skills in their past employment or through formal education, and so we spend the other five days doing intensive training in areas such as negotiating, networking, presenting to groups, handling difficult situations and even dining etiquette. We enlist the services of several consultants and coaches to help our people practice and perfect these skills, primarily through role playing.

I also sit through most of these sessions and get an invaluable first hand perspective on both the comparative strengths and areas requiring improvement for our team members. We are then able to prescribe additional training for each as required. I also get to know each of the attendees well and vice versa, which I feel makes our team feel even more connected.

To date, more than half of our team are "graduates" of the MVP program. Benefits to Trisura include highly capable employees who are better aligned with our corporate culture, and high levels of employee engagement and retention, all of which are reflected in both our top and bottom lines. It's a big commitment, but well worth while in the long run. **TB**

Mike George is president and CEO of Trisura Guarantee Insurance Company.