

# Why Culture

## Matters

BY LYNN HOOD

"Corporate culture" has such a touchy-feely connotation that many business owners instinctively back off or glaze over when it's raised. With physicians, who are accustomed to proceeding based on hard evidence, the reaction can be even more vehemently negative. After all, it doesn't count since you can't measure it, right? Wrong.

There are solid financial measurements that show strong corporate cultures benefit everyone – employees, customers, management and even the all-important bottom line. Simply look at the financial performance of the companies perennially included in *The 100 Best Companies to Work For in America* for confirmation. Stock market data confirms that the publicly traded 100 Best Companies consistently outperform major stock indices.

Articles on culture tend to center on technology and retail companies such as Google, Apple, Southwest Airlines, Nordstrom and Zappos. These companies have established powerful brands and laudable working environments. So why is it such a struggle to find examples of great team culture within healthcare? After all, this is an industry focused on people!

At a recent conference, I learned of the small Atlanta company, EndoChoice, which has created a new business model that provides comprehensive, innovative products and services for the GI professional. The company has become



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as well known for its culture as its revolutionary approach. It's easy to see why EndoChoice's culture is creating an industry buzz when you meet with members of the management team. During the company's formation, the team proactively formulated a culture around the homemade acronym of "CHIE."

CHIE is an acronym for Clever, High quality, Innovative and Exceeding expectations. It summarizes company employees' commitment to surpass the expectations of their colleagues AND their customers. Today, CHIE has become a part of EndoChoice's corporate DNA and apparently it resonates with GI professionals. They were recently named by *Inc. Magazine* as one of the fastest growing companies in America.

EndoChoice CEO, Mark Gilreath says that in the past year, numerous GI groups have inquired about the CHIE culture at EndoChoice and how it might be implemented within a GI endoscopy lab setting, whether an Ambulatory Surgery Center (ASC) or at a hospital. Is it possible? Would it be practical?

With these interesting questions in mind, the EndoChoice team took advantage of a confluence of events that created a great opportunity. The American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) held a conference on *Fostering Innovation & Technology* Conference in Palo Alto in March this year. Since members of the EndoChoice team were attending, they also arranged a private tour of the Googleplex (Google's headquarters) for a group of thought-leading GI physicians.

A group of 18 GI professionals arrived at Googleplex where, even on a Friday night, there were still employees working onsite. For a group of highly trained, specialty physicians, it was a fascinating tour. The culture, expectations and openness represented a dramatically different environment than the everyday experience of their colleagues in a GI lab.

Google offers a host of perks to enhance retention and support produc-



tivity, including free breakfast, lunch and dinner, haircuts, laundry, child care, chiropractors, and five on-site physicians (although no gastroenterologists yet). Employees can bring their dogs to work, work out, take a swim or decompress in a capsule impermeable to sound and light. There's even an organic garden and about 20 micro-kitchens spread throughout the campus.

The engineers rule at Google. They have tremendous flexibility, but they don't accept change without data. And though it's a data-driven organization – much like a medical practice – the importance Google places on an unquantifiable attribute like culture has resulted in tremendous success.

### Four Ways to Improve Your Medical Specialty Culture

In reflecting on the benefits of the Google visit, Gilreath is reminded of one of his favorite quotes from Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Man's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions."

Based on the best practices from Google, EndoChoice and the physicians, here are a few building blocks that may be useful to create an engaging culture within your medical practice:

1. Talent – hire the best people and treat them like you want to be treated.
2. Metrics – develop a set of keymetrics which are maintained and shared so the team can monitor progress.
3. Communicate – discuss the metrics openly and often among all members of your team.

# The Tunnel at the End of the Light

MY ENDOSCOPIC JOURNEY  
IN SIX DECADES

## Chapter 14 Excerpt – Perils of the Podium

I remember one surgeon speaker, whose face fell when he saw his first slide. “OMG, I have brought the wrong slides. Never mind, bring me some chalks.” He gave a 30 minute talk beautifully illustrated with colored anatomical drawings across a long blackboard.

It was an impressive performance and everyone applauded vigorously, except for me, since I had seen him do it several times before.

Another memorable opener was a small man who walked to the podium carrying some heavy reference books. This did not look promising. But then he put the books on the floor behind the podium and stood on them.

One of my worst moments at the beginning of a talk was in Japan. I had a Japanese research fellow at the time in London, and I asked him to teach me three sentences in Japanese - honor to be here, sorry need to speak English, etc. I practiced them all the way over the pole and delivered them to a huge audience. Then I stopped, waiting for the expected appreciative mutter or applause, but there was dead silence. To this day I do not know whether my pronunciation was bad, or if they considered it some sort of insult that I should try, or even perhaps if my research assistant had played a nasty trick and put bad words into my mouth.

I did hear bad words from one visiting speaker, a distinguished psychiatrist, at a meeting in England, when the chairman host spent far too long introducing him and extolling his endless virtues. Rising to his feet, he said slowly and clearly, “now I know what it is like to ride into the promised land on the back of an ass.”

**Peter Cotton** was born and raised in England, where his father was a country doctor. He studied medicine at Cambridge University and St. Thomas' Hospital Medical School in London, graduating in 1963. He decided to specialize in gastroenterology in 1967, coming under the influence of Dr. Brian Creamer in the St Thomas' "gut hut." At around that time, a revolution started in gastroenterology, with the introduction of the first fully flexible endoscopes ("fibrescopes"), instruments for seeing inside the digestive tract. Hence the name of the book, *The Tunnel at the End of the Light*.

See [www.petercotton.com](http://www.petercotton.com) for details and excerpts, and how to order signed copies.

Proceeds benefit the “Peter Cotton Endoscopy Training Fund”

4. Collaborate – everyone has good ideas, and bringing in fresh view points can yield new insights.

Every physician I spoke with agreed that the true heart of their practice is the patient, and the practice should operate accordingly. Creating a strong clinical practice takes persistence and perseverance. Think of it like a houseplant: nurture it and it will grow. And that's good CHIE!

*Feedback from the group of physicians was eye-opening (although almost universally their first question was how to apply for the job as an on-site physician at Google!).*

### TRANSPARENCY AND METRICS

*Dr. Louis Korman, from Washington, DC, observed that Google's willingness to let everyone have a voice in decision making creates a sense of ownership among employees. “The transparency enables the employees to voice their feelings about the decisions that are being made. Although this can be a ‘messy’ system it gives everyone a chance to be heard and good ideas can come from anywhere. So even if your ideas are rejected, you have a sense that they will be seriously considered by those responsible for management.”*

*Dr. Korman said he was struck by the use of metrics: “Metrics are not used as a ‘stick’ to motivate, but as a tool to create understanding. I like that approach, and want to provide metrics to our staff so they can measure the practice and what individuals are doing so they can make better choices.”*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONS

*For Dr. Joel Brill, from Scottsdale, AZ, the trip to Google emphasized the importance of open communications. “The open workplace is designed for learning, interaction and sharing of knowledge. It makes one think whether we are communicating information to all of our staff and could it spark their interest in helping the GI service do a better job.”*

*“If you provide people with the tools to do a great job, they will exceed your expectations,” Dr. Brill said when asked about the impact of culture in an ASC. “You have to nourish, not nag. And listen to your customers, they will tell you what is right – and wrong – with your business operations. Good listeners can translate that into opportunities for improvement, creating a culture where people will do what it takes to get a job with you, even if you don't pay the highest wages.”*

*For Dr. Daniel DeMarco, in Dallas, TX, the Googleplex reminded him more of a campus than a business workplace. The Medical Director of Endoscopy of Baylor University Medical Center, Dr. DeMarco said, “The culture of education and trying new things as well as never being satisfied with the status quo can most definitely be applied to my practice. I was most impressed with the Google workplace culture, and I wish our culture could be more like it.”*

*Dr. John Allen, from Minneapolis, MN, agrees with Google on the open workplace, and already has that at Minnesota Gastroenterology. “I was struck by the open workplace and emphasis on personal interaction. Years ago we did away with private MD offices and grouped our providers together to increase interactions. This has made a huge difference in discussions about patient care.”*

*Dr. Blair Lewis, from New York City, also said that people want to play a valuable role in an organization, and to be appreciated for their contributions. “The feeling of TEAM is very important, and if you can get that sense then the organization overall will benefit tremendously. Employees will go that extra yard, and the customers or patients recognize that. CHIE is about feeling wanted, needed and appreciated; enjoying the work; and translating that experience to the customer.”*

*Lynn Hood began her career as a reporter for a daily newspaper and has worked with a variety of corporations and agencies as a senior writer and strategist. Her experience ranges from writing about best practices at nuclear power plants for the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO) to helping companies create internal communications programs that empower and motivate employees. She received a degree in journalism from the University of Georgia. For a copy of the full white paper on corporate culture, contact [CHIE@endochoice.com](mailto:CHIE@endochoice.com).*