

# A Passion for Ice-Breaking Work Culture

*An inside look at the rewards of making culture #1*

» BY KAREN RICHARDSON

*A friendly game c*

**C**anlan Ice Sports Corp. is a great example of how Canadian companies are prioritizing a work culture of passion for the customer experience and excellence in operations, from the executive level to the front-line employee. As the largest private-sector owner and operator of recreational ice sports facilities in North America, they currently own and/or manage 18 facilities in Canada and the U.S., with 68 surfaces including ice rinks and indoor turf fields.

Being in the business of sports and entertainment, with children, their families and adult recreational hockey leagues as the primary customers, it seems only fitting that the company culture is all about bringing your passion to work and using teamwork to build customer loyalty. And while these may sound like common buzzwords within companies today, Canlan prioritized these aspects as critical success factors in their strategic plan, and built them right into their operating plan with measurements for success. “We couldn’t effectively execute a strategy unless we had people pulling in the same direction, so we put a lot of focus on culture,” says President and CEO Joey St. Aubin.

The culture work, and maintaining a positive emphasis on the customer, has been an ongoing focus since the beginning, according to Mark Reynolds, Vice-President of Human Resources at Canlan. “We’re in the recreation service, so people involved in supplying services to the customer really have to like dealing with people, and they really have to like the recreation industry.”

With more than 10 million visitors a year, this Burnaby, B.C.-based company has not been without challenges, however: it hires largely casual, part-time employees, has multiple locations across North America and needs to provide recreational services at a price families can afford. It also runs at a high capital cost with a very narrow margin.

And yet they were still able to place company culture as a number one priority, make steady improvements and engage employees in a structured process along the way. So how did they do it?

## **Step 1: Defining the Culture**

St. Aubin took the time to articulate the link between the company’s strategy and goals and the future state of the com-



Outdoor ice hockey at the North American Manager's Conference at Sun Peaks Resort, B.C.

pany culture. This included establishing values and leadership behaviours that would guide every level of the organization. Canlan enlisted the help of the external consulting company Culture-Strategy Fit to help with this, and to assist with developing priorities and plans.

In addition, St. Aubin made leaders accountable for the development of high-performing operations, and was willing to remove leaders who did not value building a strong culture of passionate customer service.

This emphasis on customer service might stem from his time spent on the front lines. In 2012, St. Aubin stepped down from the top job to film “Undercover Boss Canada” and to work closely with the employees. Disguised as a trainee looking to gain experience, he worked as a Zamboni driver, a waiter, a program instructor and a cleaner to get a closer look at how the organization was doing and the possible changes that were needed.

“It was a great experience for me to step back from my responsibilities as President/CEO of the company, to spend some time on the front lines with staff to see how hard they worked and how much knowledge they have,” said St. Aubin, when interviewed in the show.

St. Aubin saw first-hand the challenges his employees face in order to create a great customer experience. He was also impressed with the level of care that went into the work, and how often the employees went above and beyond. “The biggest thing I’ve discovered from my time with my team members is that there are things we can do better as a company to give them the tools to succeed,” he claimed.

He also noticed a divide between the corporate office in Toronto and what was happening out in the field. “We have some exceptional people. They care. They’re passionate. I think we

need to give them a louder voice in our decision-making.”

The employees in turn felt proud that the president would take the time to learn the roles and work with them. “After that program, the executive team got together and committed to doing back-to-the-floor shifts to work as cleaners, sales agents, instructors — reconnecting with our core products and the positions that we have within the organization,” says St. Aubin. “It’s really been a great relationship-building tool, and it creates credibility and respect at all levels within the organization.”

## Step 2: A Culture Snapshot Survey

To further understand current culture strengths and development needs, a “Culture Snapshot” survey from Culture-Strategy Fit was conducted in 2010 and every two years thereafter. The snapshot helps leaders understand the ways they are shaping culture in their behaviours and practices. Leaders work together on the results at the managers’ meetings, and they develop their action plans within and across groups.

“We are given a score card for each facility or location, which is reviewed by the regional vice-presidents with their general managers, and in turn the general managers review the scores with their team of managers,” says St. Aubin. “There are open-ended questions and raw data is shared with the team.

We then pull together representatives from each department and host a culture roundtable discussion, where we break the participants into groups to tackle the feedback to determine what it means and what we need to do to address it. Each facility comes out of these meetings with their own set of action plans.”

The response rate for the survey is high. “It’s made clear to everyone that their voice is important, and that this is how they can contribute to making it the best workplace possible and help



the executive team make wise decisions as it tries to improve the culture,” he says.

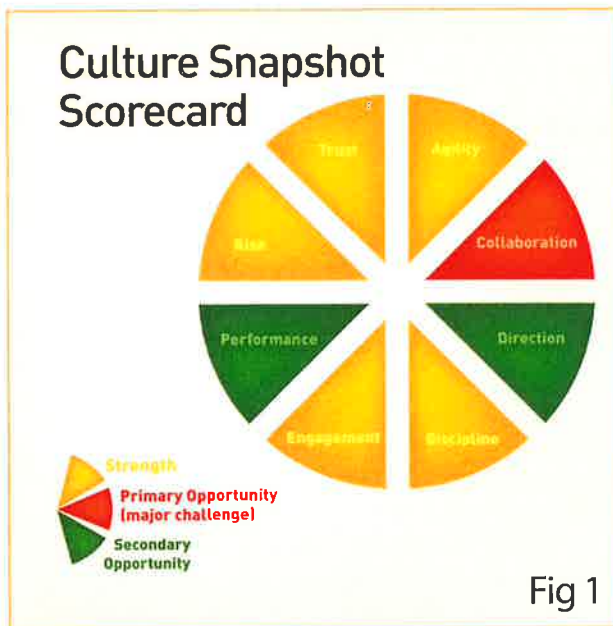
Canlan also recognizes some of the unique regional subcultures, and how they operate in the East, West, the U.S. and in Quebec.

Ultimately, they took the time to identify what their culture is and what they want it to be. The way in which Canlan articulates it now is, “We are a high-energy, action-oriented culture focused on exceptional service, with a strong foundation of teamwork, pride, respect and accountability, while consistently striving for excellence,” says St. Aubin.

The company shares this with the organization through communications, job descriptions, evaluations, work practices and onboarding programs. They also hire to fit. “We make sure that when we hire, they can relate to the core values, so there’s no conflict there in terms of how they behave as human beings and how they’re expected to behave when they are part of our company.”

Being in the industry of sports, teamwork is a strong foundation of their work culture. “What you might hear when you come into our facilities is that it’s a family-type atmosphere, it’s people having each other’s backs and looking after each other’s best interests, and that trickles down to the customer.”

Canlan uses social clubs and social committees, with events such as family picnics, sports such as ball games, family skates and other team-building activities and off-side events to build relationships. “We build products to help corporations get their people out of their cubicles and out into an environment where they can interface in a different fashion — they can connect as people,” he says.



### Step 3: Measuring Results

Canlan is a disciplined company that is able to balance a passion for helping people with their recreational needs, with a focus on measuring results.



*Gingerbread house competition at the holiday “Culture Friday”.*

“This focus is really part in parcel of the monthly business review meetings that happen at the executive level, and are driven by numbers,” says Reynolds. “A key component to our business focus is zero-based budgeting,” he says. “Each of our facility areas and departments start fresh and build their own budget for the upcoming calendar year.”

Integral in that is market analysis and competitive benchmarking. “When you have the people on the ground building the business plan for the facility, then they’re much more connected to it. We find that it’s much better to use as a base, it’s much more accurate, and it also provides a very strong connection within each of the facilities for what they’re accountable for.”

Results are also measured through the Culture Snapshot Survey. Questions from the survey address trust, agility, collaboration, direction, discipline, engagement, performance and risk, and the results indicate areas of strength, areas of primary opportunity and areas of secondary opportunity.

Their last survey in 2012 showed that collaboration remained in the Red Zone and was an area of concern (see Fig 1.). During their recent senior managers conference Culture-Strategy Fit facilitated a team learning exercise on collaboration. “The groups came out with a list of five keys things we needed to improve in order to move the needle on collaboration,” says St. Aubin. “We prioritized those key items and we are now getting all of our teams at all levels of the organization to focus on the priority one item and review with their team members to determine what they need to do to change/improve in that specific area.”

St. Aubin embraces the survey, citing a strengthening of culture. “Customers can feel it as they walk through the door, new employees sense it when they compliment us on how effective we’ve been in creating that environment for them compared to their previous workplaces, and the onboarding programs and the training programs all resonate because we’ve zeroed in on all of it.”

Their success is also measured through employee retention and employee turnover. “You spend less time having to train new people, because your people stick around longer,” says St. Aubin.



here Corporate Office staff have lunch together every other week.

“With time and experience it creates capacity, so your people are able to take on more responsibility.” Keeping brain power within the organization is also important in that it can help the business grow, allowing employees to expand their thought process and take on new roles, he says.

#### Step 4: Engaging Employees Along the Way

Canlan has made changes to their agendas at their annual conferences to ensure the topics enhance and improve the culture of the company. “It’s not all about money and business,” says St. Aubin. “It’s about the people – rewarding them and recognizing them for their efforts, and making sure that we listen to them. There’s been a lot more exchange through our agendas now. We talk about a topic, as opposed to preaching about a topic.”

Culture roundtables involve representatives of the various departments within each facility and the corporate office to talk about challenges and action plans. St. Aubin has recently been visiting all facilities across Canada and connecting by conference call or video conference. “I’ve committed to talking directly to the management team of each facility about how the executive team could help improve collaboration throughout the organization. I’m encouraging them to speak freely, to put everything on the table, to not treat me as the president, but just as one of them. There’s been great dialogue and they appreciate that.”

#### Step 5: Facing Challenges

The food and beverage business is infamous for employee turnover, which is just one of the challenges Canlan faces. “With new employees coming in frequently they’re not as invested in the organization, so you have to do a really good job at the forefront in getting them connected to the organization through your onboarding process and through your structured on-the-job training programs,” says St. Aubin. Canlan puts a great emphasis on learning and development and getting people engaged. “While we may not be able to retain

them because they are going off to school, we’re able to attract them in coming back. Eventually once they are educated and ready for a career, they have a tendency to come back.”

Canlan owns and operates a number of facilities, which is “a lot of bricks and mortar,” as Reynolds puts it. Facilities deteriorate so they have to reinvest money back to keep them properly maintained. “The key focus for our building maintenance is safety first, and our wish-list items second.”

#### Step 6: Maintaining Structure and Discipline

Canlan has been disciplined about their prescribed sports programs and teaching according to age, which again fosters high standards and a company culture of excellence. “Structure is always important,” says St. Aubin. “You have to make sure you align your various areas of the business effectively. If there’s misalignment, then there’s miscommunication or there could be some conflicts within the organization in terms of priorities.”

#### Step 7: Creative Expansion

Canlan’s strong culture has enabled them to grow, and recently they have ventured into new territory to include courts and turf sports in a new facility brand they call Canlan Sportsplex. They opened their first facility in October 2012. “We believe we can take our expertise in facility management, programming and tournament operations, and apply that to everything ‘courts and turfs,’” says St. Aubin.

Canlan is creating a culture in which people bring creative ideas for products and services. St. Aubin’s team has also introduced a new Office Hero program, which offers a chance for different companies to use Canlan’s new Sportsplex ([www.canlansports.ca](http://www.canlansports.ca)) for organized sports and activities to build camaraderie in the workplace.

“Ultimately we’re enabling an individual at the office to become ‘the Hero’ by pulling their office team or business together, getting them out of the office and getting out for a couple of hours, a half day or a full day of fun, entertainment and team building,” he says.

#### Step 8: Reaping the Rewards of an Excellent Work Culture

A positive company culture keeps employees, and Canlan has longevity in the senior leaders of their organization. “I think that people join our company because they enjoy the industry, they are passionate about sports and the fact that customers come to us to enjoy themselves,” says St. Aubin. “And the fact that we can continuously create improvements in the customer experience by adding value and thinking outside the box – I think that people really enjoy being part of a team like that.”

*Karen Richardson is a writer, editor and blogger on business, health and wellness for Canadian and U.S. publications. She can be found on Twitter @worklifewriter.*