

ACCOUNTING

BEYOND THE NUMBERS



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PODCAST EPISODE #2: THE RBF CULTURE INTERVIEW WITH JEFF BLEACHER, RBF MANAGING PARTNER TRANSCRIPT

Kae Wagner – Today we have Jeff Bleacher who is the Managing Partner at Ross Buehler Falk with us, and he is going to talk to us about the RBF culture: Ross Buehler Falk, a CPA and business advisory firm. And my understanding, Jeff, is that you guys are not your average, boring accounting firm. Talk to me about that.

Jeff Bleacher – That’s good to hear; that we’re not your average, boring accounting firm. I like that. Culture is very important. We think it’s something that you have to work very hard at and be very intentional assessing the culture that you want, because really if you don’t, you’re going to have one anyway and it may not be the one you like. We do put a lot of time and effort into that.

One of our core values is respect and teamwork and we really work hard at achieving this. We want employees who are engaged. We think employee engagement is very important today. If you look at the general numbers, there are a number of disengaged employees - actively disengaged employees - in various businesses, if you look at the statistics. And we really work to keep those numbers down because we look at it as we have two clients: internal and external. Our team is our internal clients so we want them engaged and happy so that they’re able to serve the clients day to day. They’re on the frontlines. They’re doing the work of the firm so they need to be engaged. How we do that is we spend a good deal of time on culture. We have a rather robust review process called Success Through People where everybody has a mentor and we spend a lot of time reaching for goals and coaching and mentoring people. That’s very important today. I think it’s key to the future of any business, really.

We have a talent engagement survey where we survey our employees every year on their engagement level. And what we’ve done is, we’ve taken those surveys and created teams to provide changes or suggestions to the firm on areas we can improve. So we’ve used them to change processes.

We actually set up a Fun Committee. We do fun things. We also started something this past year called Java with Jeff. I did not come up with that term, but every two weeks I lead a discussion on what’s

happening in the firm: new business, new success stories, what events we're involved in, community events. That's a chance for them to ask questions as we go through busy season or tax season. What's our status? Just all various different topics. It's really to keep everybody on the same page. And we also share the firm's strategies and why decisions are made, because today you really have to keep the employees engaged. That's one of the ways that we communicate to everyone.

Kae Wagner – Sounds like a fun way to do it, as well: Java with Jeff.

Jeff Bleacher – I can't take credit for that.

Kae Wagner – Now I understand that one of your core values also is food and lunches.

Jeff Bleacher – Yes, it is. With all due respect to my wonderful partner, Ken Falk, some people think RBF stands for Ross Buehler Food, especially during the busy season. We actually have a Fun Committee that throughout the year plans breakfasts and lunches and we do Lunch N' Learns and we have fun events like miniature golf events and picnics and various things. We went for ice cream one day during busy season, again, just to get a break. Yeah, food is a big part of our culture.

Kae Wagner – Well I follow you guys on Facebook. I see some of the food experiences that you have. All look like a lot of fun. So how would you compare your culture at RBF to the firms that are maybe more quote unquote corporate?

Jeff Bleacher – You know we're pretty much business casual almost every day and really try to dress to how our clients dress and people like that. People who work Saturdays, if we're here, we're in jeans, so we really try to keep it casual, yet professional. I think really the other thing that we do is that the partners, being a firm of our size, the partners get to know everybody. We get to know, we like to think of ourselves as a family, so the partners are interested in our team's lives both professionally and personally. We get to know each other from day to day and long term. What is really good, I think, for a culture our size is that everybody on the team gets to see the whole client. When they're dealing in engagement, they're not pigeon-holed, just audit or just tax. They get to work on the whole client. They get a quicker opportunity to work with the client's controllers, CFOs, accounting team, so they get more day-to-day direct contact which is why it's important to develop soft skills that we focus on.

And again, we create teams and committees to study processes and workflows because today it shouldn't be just us at the top quote unquote telling everybody how to run the processes. It's great to get that feedback from the people on the front lines and what they're doing. And again we create committees to look at those processes and look at those procedures. We like to think of ourselves as a family and our size permits it. The thing is we have a very flexible work schedule policy, so especially in the off season pretty much there's no core hours. People get their hours in. We have some that work three or four days a week and then have time off. We find with millennials that work/life balance and flexibility is very important today and the rest of us like it too.

Kae Wagner – I think I'd like that.

Jeff Bleacher – Probably one of the more liberal policies for an accounting firm, especially in this area.

Kae Wagner – You gave a couple of examples of how culture and core values play out. Any additional ones that you would want to mention?

Jeff Bleacher – No I don't believe so. Again, we've tried it. We're professional, but we like to have fun.

Kae Wagner – You referenced millennials. Let's talk about millennials for a little bit because they're such a huge part of the workforce and will continue to be, going forward. How do you view how millennials change your culture? Let's look at millennials not only in how they change your culture in the firm, but what is that like in terms of millennials on the client side?

Jeff Bleacher – To a big extent I do think millennials get a bad rap quote unquote. And you know I think they grew up in a different time and different experiences than we did and they've seen a lot with their families and in the business arena and in the world today. So one of the things that they want to be is engaged early on. And that's where again, in setting up committees, on helping us with processes, getting them more involved with the clients' flexibility. Really they've changed our culture in that we are now not just reactive, but in getting them engaged and involved in what needs to be done and that's why the talent survey's been great. The Java with Jeff actually was the Genesis. Genesis came from the talent engagement survey. It was an idea there. I would do it in a more informal basis or not as often, but a couple of times a year.

So again I think the millennials have really changed technology. I think they're much more cutting edge with technology, not necessarily the bleeding edge. And they've been able to help every time we have a new software change or a new change internally, they've been able to take the lead and take the forefront on adapting the new processes, adapting the new procedures and teaching the rest of us how to do it. So that's good. I find that they actually want to grow. They just want a career path. So we're very specific, again, on what their career path is, what opportunities they have. And I've really seen that also from the client side, as well. It's really adapting. You have to today. You have to be agile and really adapt to your people. And that's really what I've seen on both sides.

Kae Wagner – Well, the millennials are, in terms of numbers, are a huge group. They will have an impact and already are. I think we all do well to welcome them with open arms.

Jeff Bleacher – My experience has been that they are an extremely talented group of people and they have a lot to offer to organizations today. And really I look at it as, you know, they're our future. So we have to spend the time and get them engaged because that's the future of this firm. I had the opportunity to grow in this role and we need to provide that same opportunity for them.

Kae Wagner – Right. So as you take a look over the years, Jeff, and you look at the way the culture has evolved and changed, as you know, everyone, every business has evolved and changed over the years. And it sounds to me like the culture that you have intentionally developed and where you are now as a firm is really a very healthy culture; one that really anyone in the accounting field would want to be a part of.

Jeff Bleacher – Yes I hope so. I hope so. We do tend to have lower turnover and I think that's part of the reason, that we actually really engage our employees. I think that's so true today.

Kae Wagner – Well kudos to you and the partners and to everyone at RBF. It was a pleasure speaking with you and we will talk to you soon.

Jeff Bleacher – All right. Thank you. Great to talk to you.