NO EXCUSES!

How Any Manager Can Overcome the Most Common Challenges to Building a Great Workplace

GREAT PLACE TO WORK®

In 2011, we wrote *The Great Workplace: How to Build It, How to Keep It and Why It Matters*. It examined the Great Place to Work® Model described later in this paper, and offered examples from recognized best workplaces. As a result of this book, we had the opportunity to speak about great workplaces at a wide range of conferences, seminars, association meetings and company retreats.

We were fascinated by the response we received. On the one hand, participants were enthusiastic about great workplaces; they appreciated the simplicity, intuitiveness, and comprehensiveness of the concepts of trust, pride, and camaraderie. On the other hand, they felt that while creating a great workplace was a worthy goal, they could not see it happening anytime soon. They shared with us that they or their managers didn't have the time or resources or focus. Sometimes they would offer that that they were too big or too small, too spread out geographically, or in the wrong industry.

Behind these "excuses" was a sense of wanting to have the type of workplace culture that is high trust and high performing, one that engages the hearts, minds and hands of employees, and develops the managers and leaders that create that type of environment. The desire was evident, but so was the sense of futility. "How can we possibly take on the task of creating a high-trust culture when we just had a reduction in our labor force?" they would ask. And on and on the conversation went.

We were puzzled by this because, from our experience, many of the best workplaces had similar challenges – tight resources, a changing strategic landscape, size and geographical complexity, and so on. In our most recent book,

No Excuses, we looked to managers in recognized Best Companies to help others (those in not-yet-great workplaces) understand how to overcome them. Some of what we learned is in your hands or on your screen. We hope it helps propel you forward despite what may seem like insurmountable challenges. Any workplace can be a great one. Yours too.

Jennifer Robin
Michael Burchell

Regardless of where you are on your journey to greatness, understanding the defining characteristics of a great workplace is essential to any leader who wishes to build one. It's important to note that our definition of a great workplace is founded on over 25 years of research and knowledge gained from studying millions of employees, across 45 countries and over 6,000 organizations of all sizes, industries, ages and structures.

What Is a Great Workplace?

The defining quality of a great workplace is not found in a checklist of programs and benefits; it is created in the day-to-day **RELATIONSHIPS** that employees experience with their leadership, their work and with each other. In short, a great workplace is one in which employees:

- **TRUST** the people they work for
- Have **PRIDE** in what they do
- **ENJOY** the people they work with

How Do I Develop Trust?

Trust is developed over time as employees experience leadership through a manager who:

- Promotes two-way communication
- Demonstrates competency
- Maintains a clear vision
- Matches actions to words
- Treats employees with respect and fairness

How Do I Foster Pride?

In order for an employee to feel proud of their work they must:

- Believe that the work they do is meaningful
- Feel they are making a difference in their organization
- Take pleasure in team accomplishments
- Believe their organization positively impacts their community

How Do I Encourage Camaraderie?

Employees need to feel a real connection with coworkers. This is accomplished when they can:

- Be themselves
- Experience a sense of fun
- Engage with friendly coworkers
- Experience a sense of community or family

You Can Do This.

The elements of a great workplace seem so simple, and yet, many fail to achieve this goal for one reason or another. However, regardless of the hurdles that lie in your path, one truth remains:

Any manager can create a great workplace. In fact, any work group in any organization in any industry can become a great workplace.

Research has proven it. Greatness is calling for you. So read on to discover five obstacles that stand in the way of most who desire a great workplace and how you can overcome them all.

Everyone makes excuses. Anytime we are confronted with a gap between our potential and our reality, we experience discomfort, and excuses enable us to alleviate that discomfort. Because most of us DO intrinsically desire to reach our full potential in whatever we do, there are a lot of gaps, which results in lots of discomfort, and therefore lots of excuses.

Excuses. Excuses?

The problem with excuses is that we often use them as *periods* instead of *question marks*. That is, excuses are often a means to stop further uncomfortable conversation. Like periods at the end of sentences, they stop the thought process.

Excuses cannot build trust because they stop action before it starts.

Question Every Excuse.

One way to turn the productivity-zapping nature of an excuse into a kick-starter is to remove the period and replace it with a question mark. ***When you use an excuse as an opportunity to question rather than a signal to end the conversation, you lay the groundwork for overcoming the excuse by removing its finality.***

When you question excuses, you reopen the conversation, you embrace the opportunity to dig deeper, and most importantly, you restore the possibility of closing the gap between where you are and where you want to go. Some great questions to pose when the next excuse tries to stop you from moving forward are:

- What is really stopping us?
- How can we remove this obstacle?
- How can we work around this obstacle?
- If it is immovable, can we mitigate it?
- Can we achieve the same result through other means?

Questions Lead to Solutions.

We have never seen a workplace become great without conversation, collaboration, and persistence. If you question every excuse that stands in your way, you will inevitably discover new possibilities and solutions, as well as an unlikely platform on which to begin working toward a great workplace.

> "Excuses and apologies are comments or stories we share with others that relate to a specific event or action, though an excuse usually comes before any action has been taken and an apology comes after actions have been taken when perhaps things haven't gone so well."
>
> – Amy Lyman, Cofounder of Great Place to Work® Institute

Top 5 Excuses for Not Building a Great Workplace

1. **TIME –** "I'm swamped and I just don't have the time right now."

2. **OPERATING ENVIRONMENT—** "I'm all for it, but this would never fly in my industry."

3. **EMPLOYEES—** "We've got issues with our employees that are holding us back."

4. **TIMING—** "We just had layoffs/leadership changes/a merger, so things need to settle first."

5. **LEADERSHIP—** "My boss/executive team/department head is not on-board with this."

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Great accomplishments never come without great cost, and in our high-demand culture time is often more precious than financial resources. While some efforts to build trust with employees do take time, many are simply a matter of changing old habits and implementing new ones in their place. In either case, the results will be worth it – for employees and for you.

After all, making an effort to invest in your people creates payoffs in productivity and loyalty.

Set Priorities.

Before a workplace can become great, the pursuit of greatness must first become a priority. Employees must understand that you are serious about creating a great workplace and the easiest way for you to do this is to identify and prioritize the things that will make creating a great workplace a more manageable endeavor.

Leverage Systems You Already Have in Place.

Many powerful workplace changes can be implemented without requiring more time—simply by infusing existing systems (such as meetings) and behaviors (such as eating lunch) with habits that will deepen your relationship with employees. Here are four you can try now:

1. **Increase Approachability —** Dedicate one day a week to eating lunch with someone in your work group—or even your full team—so you get to know each other as a person.

2. **Enhance Collaboration —** Reserve the last 10 minutes of every staff meeting to have an open discussion about a specific topic, client challenge or process improvement.

3. **Encourage Positivity —** Thank employees for good work in meetings and as you see them doing something well.

4. **Inspire a Sense of Meaning —** Choose words wisely when referring to work environments, job titles, or even in general communications. For example, Marriott employees who work behind the scenes are said to work in the "heart of the house," not the "back of the house."

Leverage Your Strengths.

The skills you use to lead are the same ones you can use to build trust, pride and camaraderie. In fact, leaders who adopt a hodgepodge of best practices (instead of using their own strengths to impact their environment) won't build trust among employees, because people recognize and reject inauthenticity.

Same Strength. New Application.

To build trust using your own strengths, start small and set achievable goals. For example, if you are not a great public speaker, but prefer to communicate in writing, try sharing your thoughts and insights with employees through a regular blog or newsletter. If you are a task-driven leader, use that focus to celebrate employee accomplishments with the same passion and determination that enable you to get jobs done.

> "I think if other people are saying they're too busy to think about culture, then what are they doing? That is a main function of our job. It's not necessarily something I consciously think about. I don't come in the door and say, 'Better manage that culture today!'"
>
> – Zappos Manager

7 Tips for Overcoming Time Limitations

Changing habits and behavior takes time and persistence, so be sure to give yourself plenty of grace as you adopt new ones. In time, you WILL succeed in becoming a great workplace.

1. **OBSERVE** your current processes and habits and note things you'd like to improve.

2. **INSTILL** trust, pride and camaraderie-building behaviors into habits already in place.

3. **WRITE** down goals for new habits and include practical ways to navigate obstacles to change.

4. **BECOME** the change you want to see. If you've said you want to see more collaboration, invite coworkers to collaborate with you.

5. **REWARD** new habits with praise, bonuses and other demonstrations of appreciation.

6. **INVEST** in building relationships.

7. **RECOGNIZE** your strengths and use them to build trust, pride and camaraderie.

Excuse #2 – My Operating Environment Is Different.

Every workplace encounters unique challenges when faced with external forces such as globalization, the economy, demographic trends, etc. However, it's critical to remember that EVERY decision leaders make (regardless of the force driving it) is a PEOPLE decision, and paying attention to how a decision affects people is what makes a workplace great.

Everybody's Got Issues.

Many issues are not as unique to an industry or operating environment as leaders believe them to be. For example, manufacturing and tech companies that operate 24/7 have much in common with hospitals that are also striving to maintain excellence among night-shift employees.

Despite all our differences, everyone is looking for the same thing in a work environment — a place where they can experience trust, pride and camaraderie.

Below are some of the challenges many companies face as a result of their operating environment, and ideas for overcoming them.

Resources vs. Resourcefulness

A big budget is a beautiful thing, but it's not always the best thing. Throwing money at problems often robs employees of opportunities to collaborate, cooperate and innovate, which ultimately robs them of pride in accomplishments and camaraderie. Next time you're faced with a lack of resources, take a cue from many great non-profits, and invite your team to be resourceful.

Ideas for Balancing the Work/Life Seesaw

Professional services firms have some of the most demanding schedules of any industry, and yet many have found innovative ways to respect employees as people while accomplishing work goals. Accenture, a professional services firm who has also been recognized for many years as a great workplace, has created a few initiatives worth trying including:

➡️ A wellness program that enables employee teams to set health and fitness goals and then compete to complete. People are recognized and rewarded as they achieve goals.

➡️ Honoring road warriors by giving them full weekends at home through a 3-4-5 policy where three nights and four days they work out of town and the fifth day they work from anywhere they like.

➡️ Keeping an open calendar of planned employee time off so coworkers can anticipate and support each other's absences.

Big and Fabulous

Just because your company is massive and maintains offices across several countries and cultures, it doesn't mean you can't create a cohesive sense of identity and connectedness. One of the easiest ways to foster identity is to establish a common set of values and then reinforce them through orientation, communication and rewards. To encourage feelings of connectedness schedule regular meetings via phone or video with satellite offices and exchange ideas with their employees about processes and tools that are working.

> "I think we probably all have [a 'no excuses'] approach to our work. If we need something, we'll find a way to figure it out."
>
> - Teach for America Manager

7 Tips for Overcoming Challenges Posed by Your Operating Environment

Several forces impact your industry, but it is possible to overcome issues of size, budget and distance by focusing on what you can do now to create a cohesive sense of identity and team spirit.

1. **VIEW** every decision as a people decision and an opportunity to build relationships.

2. **FIND** commonalities you share with other industries and learn from their successes and mistakes.

3. **ASSESS** the reality of your workplace demands and choose employees who understand and are energized by the challenges.

4. **FOCUS** on what you can do to give employees more flexibility, not what you can't do.

5. **VISIT** with employees on the floor and at other sites as often as possible.

6. **USE** compliance and resource setbacks as opportunities to collaborate and innovate.

7. **ALIGN** your organization's identity with day-to-day practices and reiterate its message to employees on a regular basis.
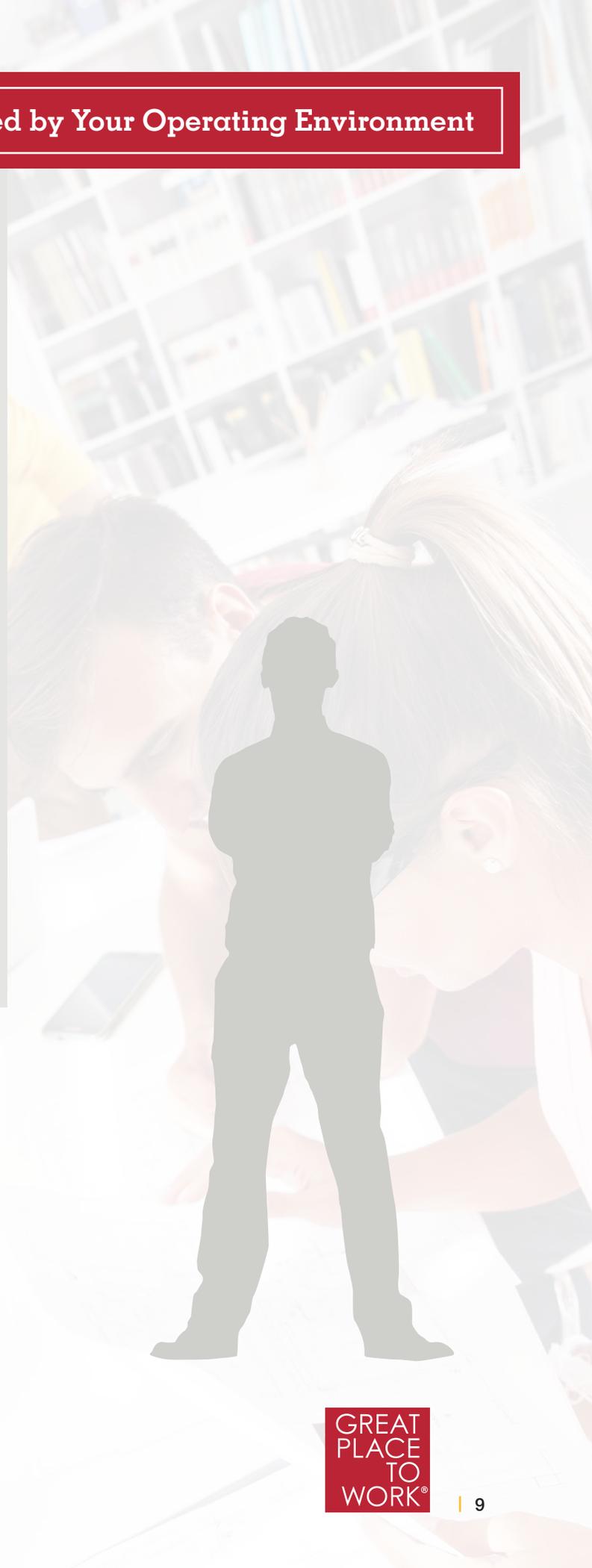
Excuse #3 – It's Not the Right Time.

Leadership changes, mergers, layoffs and other disruptive events bring big changes to the workplace, but they also bring big opportunities. And while it's true that people need time to adapt to changes in the workplace, research has shown that when leaders take the time to build high-trust relationships with employees, it enables employees to embrace changes faster.

In fact, if a disruptive event has created a culture of uncertainty, making an effort to build trust during this time is one of the smartest strategies you can implement.

Now Is Always a Good Time.

The problem with change is that it brings a level of uncertainty, and uncertainty creates a perfect atmosphere for fear, rumors and negativity. The good news is that there is an antidote to fear and its byproducts: Trust. Since change is inevitable and disruptive events will always occur, it's wise to plan ahead by implementing practices today that build trust, pride and camaraderie. Even if you are in the midst of a major disruptive event, you can help restore calm and dismantle the power of fear by engaging employees in trust-building activities.

What Do Employees Need During Change?

Managers can reduce stress on employees during times of change by:

➡ Creating a sense of community by promoting the idea that everyone is facing change together

➡ Ensuring employees are prepared to adapt by supplying them with all information available

➡ Outlining next steps, so employees can maintain purpose and direction

➡ Continuing to promote a sense of safety and support throughout the process

Stay Strong.

The best companies know their strengths and build on them in response to disruptive events. The next time a disruptive event occurs, begin by examining what your people do best and how those advantages can be applied to the current circumstances. When you focus on strengths, it enables everyone in the organization to find their footing faster and manage change with less fear and more trust in their company, coworkers and abilities.

"[As part of a workforce reduction,] we put together packages for people that were above and beyond. It's almost like knowing that you're letting some family members go and you want to make sure that they do better than just land on their feet. That did happen. We tracked them all. It was about 84% of people who landed in an equal or better paying job without relocation."

- Frank Rudolph, EVP Human Resources, Devon Energy

While it may seem counterintuitive, disruptive events offer an ideal time to build trust and pursue the dream of creating a great workplace.

1. **COMMUNICATE** with and check in on employees often.

2. **INVOLVE** employees as much as possible in problem-solving, which fosters team spirit, security and a sense that everyone is facing change together.

3. **CONSIDER** all solutions and possibilities, not just the quickest and easiest to implement.

4. **LOOK** for opportunities to pause and bring employees together to celebrate, reflect or honor results of the change.

5. **FOCUS** on the strengths of your company's identity and people and build from there.

Managing people is a rewarding job, but it can be difficult when you are faced with issues such as motivating part-time employees, encouraging employees who have a sense of entitlement, and rallying dysfunctional teams you didn't have the luxury of choosing. When the issue you face is a people challenge, the best path is to reexamine your approach and then look for creative ways to build trust and healthy relationships.

Understanding Employee Behavior

There are many forces that drive employee behavior, from job roles and responsibilities, to family and life situations. When an employee does something once, it's an anomaly; twice is a coincidence; and three times is a pattern.

Understanding why a pattern of behavior is developing, whether good or bad, is critical to creating a great workplace.

However, take care not to assign motivation to a pattern of behavior without first sitting down and asking the employee why they are doing something. Once you understand why an employee is behaving a certain way, then you can set realistic goals to manage that behavior.

Defining the Psychological Contract

Included under the umbrella of entitlement issues are psychological contracts, which are the unspoken beliefs employees have about what is required and what is expected. For example, if a new hire is told there is flexibility, they will assume there is a degree of latitude in terms of their schedule and workflow that is not explicitly stated in the employee handbook. However, when employees' psychological contracts are not in line with actual workplace culture and goals, they may expect more than what is provided, resulting in morale issues.

Addressing Psychological Contracts

To ensure employee psychological contracts are in line with the company mission, vision and culture, consider the nature of your work and its meaning to employees and answer these questions:

- What are the basic beliefs that motivate and engage employees?
- How do these employee beliefs shape our organization's values?
- What policies, practices and programs can we address or implement to align employees' beliefs with the actual company values?

Ways to Engage Part-Time Employees

Some of the ways you can motivate part-time employees to run with the vision of your organization include:

- Convey to them how their work is making a difference in the company.
- Include them in safety, accountability and company culture initiatives.
- Solicit their feedback and involve them in the life of your business.
- Set an example by treating them with respect in front of full-time workers.
- Make sure they are equipped with the training and resources needed to do their job.

"We've got about 3,000 salaried employees and about 1,000 hourly craft workers. Everyone has a level of respect for what needs to get accomplished. Either individually or as a business leader, you cast your shadow and the way you cast your shadow across a subcontractor community is talked about and seen, and people respond to it."

- Robert Van Cleave, Retired CEO of Balfour Beatty

6 Tips for Overcoming Employee Issues

Aligning all employees to support the mission and vision of your company is a task that will require much time and patience, but the results and impact on your workplace are worth the effort.

1. **LISTEN** to employees and help them see the value of creating a great workplace.

2. **ADDRESS** people's needs, interests and self-concepts with creativity and innovation.

3. **DIFFUSE** entitlement issues by talking to employees openly about their expectations.

4. **ENSURE** employees understand that practices may change, but the company's core values and beliefs do not.

5. **COLLABORATE** with union leadership to develop trust-based relationships.

6. **RECOGNIZE** the unique gifts and ideologies that each generation brings to a workplace and look for ways to use them to accomplish company goals.

Excuse #5 – My Boss Isn't On Board.

Of all the excuses for not becoming a great workplace, lack of leadership buy-in is the most formidable. But before you give up your dream of a great workplace, consider that your leaders may not see the value of a great workplace. If this is the case, then now is the time to use your powers of persuasion to share with them how research has proven that great workplace practices increase productivity and profitability, and reduces turnover.

If reasoning with leaders does not work, you can always create a great workplace in your department, and in time those same leaders who "didn't get it" will most likely be clamoring for you to help them replicate your results throughout the rest of the company.

Use Your Resources and Authority.

While budgets and buy-in are nice if you can get them, they aren't essential to your mission. All you really need is the desire and ability to develop trust-based relationships with your employees. As you reach out to them to build trust, pride and camaraderie in the workplace, you'll find they will do the same.

Stay focused on those things that you can influence, and in time, your sphere of influence will increase and open doors that were once closed.

Working with Tough Mandates

Even if you work hard to make people a priority in your group, sometimes decisions passed down from leaders (i.e. layoffs, budget cuts and restructures) won't align with that priority. When these things happen, the best leaders do the following:

➡ Be authentic, honest and forthright about what has to be done.

➡ Do not sugarcoat tough tasks because it dismisses the feelings of employees and impedes trust.

➡ Use adversity as a catalyst to bond with your people and work together to develop solutions.

➡ Listen to and support your team throughout the process.

Create a Great Department.

In every organization there are departments, divisions and locations where employees enjoy a great workplace experience. These little pockets of greatness do not happen on their own, but are carefully cultivated by managers who persist against all odds. You can be that manager. To get started, try adopting the practices listed below that these managers have in common.

➡ Create a strong sense of identity in your department.

➡ Adopt a healthy mindset that treats cognitive obstacles as issues to be overcome.

➡ Use whatever power and position you have to build trust, pride and camaraderie.

➡ Lead by example and use your influence to inspire employees.

> "We don't do this stuff because we're all nice guys; it's not for altruistic purposes. We do it because we fundamentally believe that a happy, challenged, motivated workforce puts forth more effort, commitment, and energy, which translates to better bottom-line results."
>
> - John Richels, CEO, Devon Energy

9 Tips for Overcoming Leadership Issues

Overcoming a lack of support from leaders is tough, but not impossible. If you can't win them over in the beginning, start small and win them in the end with the amazing results your department experiences as you use your sphere of influence to create a great workplace.

1. **LOCATE** managers at your company who are working toward an environment of trust, pride and camaraderie, and take them to lunch or coffee, so you can learn about their successes.

2. **CREATE** a community of practice with other interested managers, so you can learn from one another and generate momentum throughout the workplace.

3. **VISIT** greatplacetowork.com and browse the latest studies on how trust, pride and camaraderie impact financial results, so you are ready for opportunities to win friends and influence people.

4. **OWN** your role as the primary conduit for how employees experience an organization.

5. **DEVELOP** an organizational identity scaled to your work group that answers why your department exists and how it hopes to impact the larger organization.

6. **MAKE** creating a great workplace a priority.

7. **FOCUS** on what you can change, not what you can't.

8. **RESOLVE** to work with your team to meet organizational initiatives.

9. **FIND** ways to use the requirements of your role to build trust, pride and camaraderie.
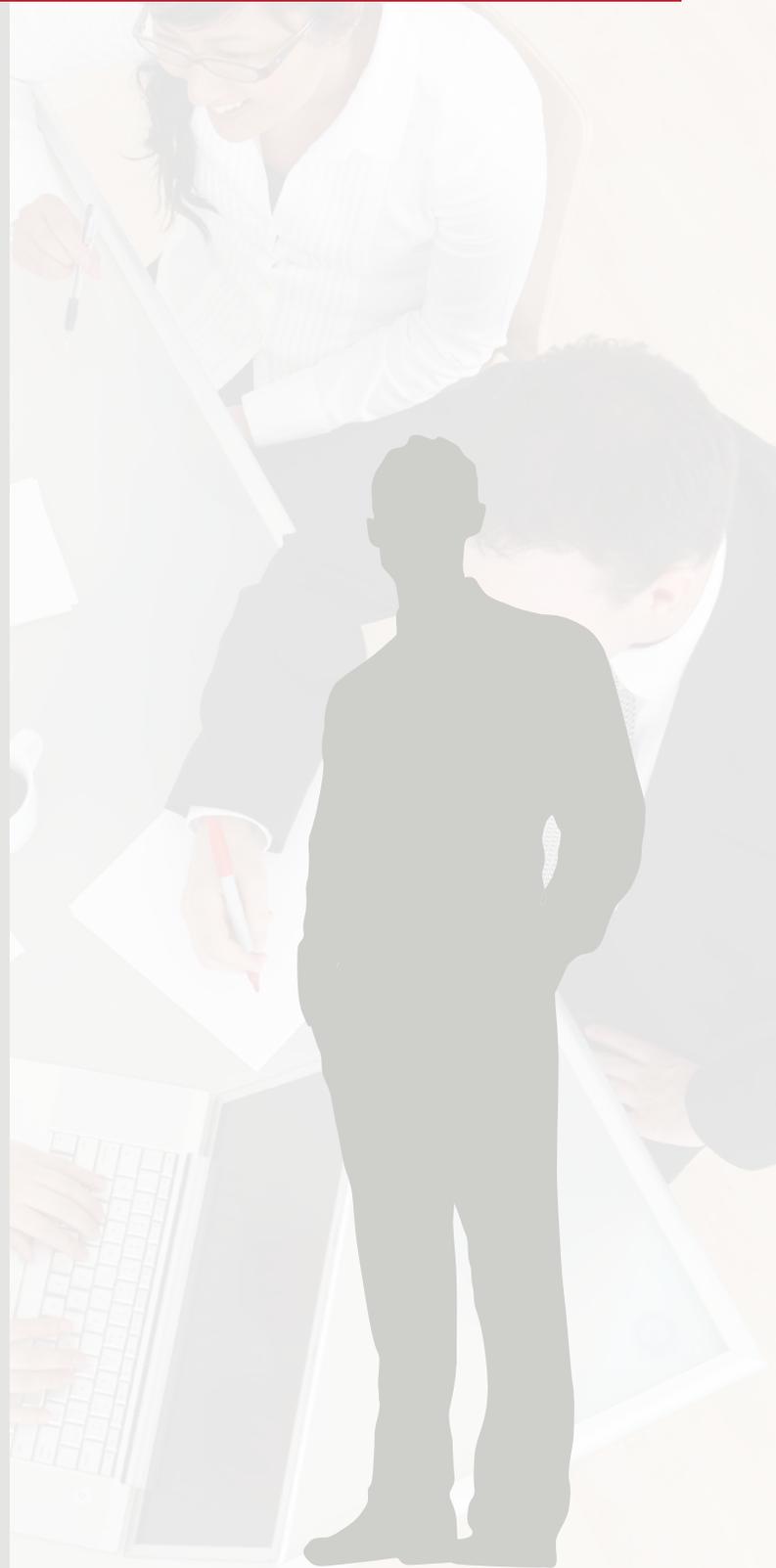
You're Going to Do a Great Job.

Creating a great workplace may not be an easy task, but it is within your reach. As you put these solutions into practice in your workplace, they will become easier to do until they are ingrained in your culture. For any excuse you encounter:

1. **ADOPT** the rule of great workplaces: Treat every interaction as an opportunity to build trust, and you will overcome cognitive obstacles.

2. **KNOW** yourself: Get clear on your workgroup and/or organization's identity, and be sure you are acting in ways that reinforce that identity while allowing it to evolve to meet the needs of your environment.

3. **FIND** opportunity in the challenges you encounter, and seek inspiration from people who lead great workplaces.

We wish you no excuses and all the best on your journey to becoming a great workplace.

For Additional Research

We hope this white paper has armed you with knowledge and practical steps for overcoming many of the challenges you face to creating a great workplace.

For additional research, case studies and tips for addressing these and other common excuses, we invite you to read our book: *No Excuses: How You Can Turn Any Workplace into a Great One*.
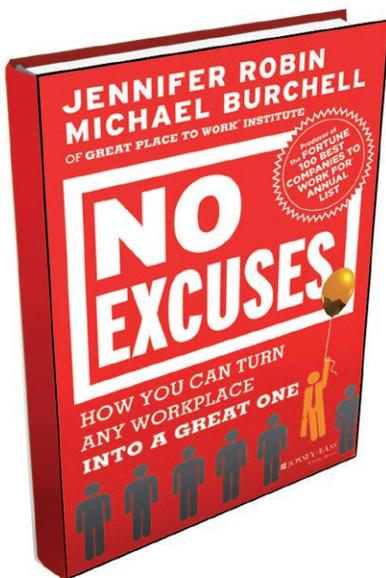
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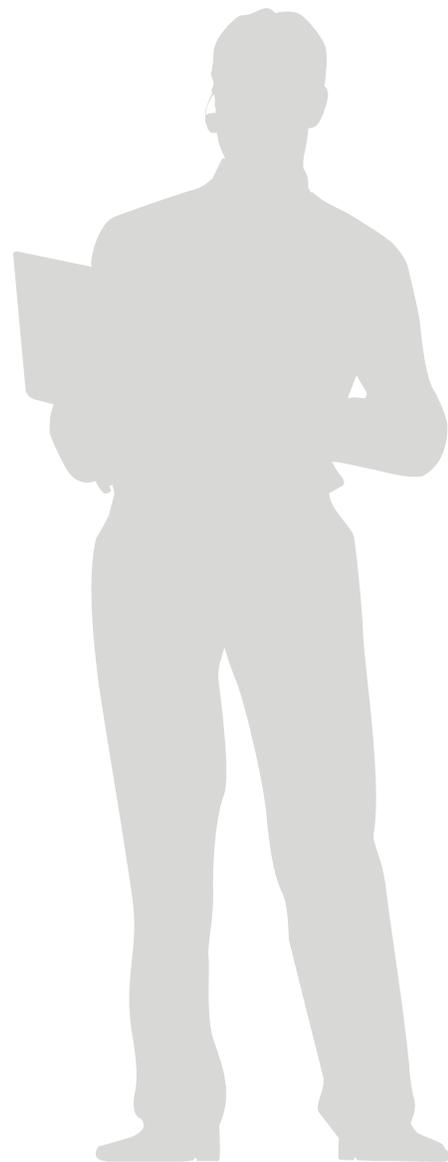
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Jennifer is also a Research Fellow and an Adjunct Consultant at Great Place to Work® Institute. A former Senior Consultant with the Institute, she led the Advisory Practice, helping senior leaders integrate their organization's culture with its strategy and aligning efforts to be a great workplace. Jennifer has experience in diverse industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, biotechnology, information technology, and professional services.

Michael Burchell

Dr. Michael Burchell is an expert in human capital strategy and transformational change. He is the co-author of two books, *No Excuses: How You Can Turn Any Workplace into a Great One (2013)*, and *The Great Workplace: How to Build It, How to Keep It, and Why It Matters (2011)*.

Michael is Client Services Lead for North America with McKinsey & Company's Organizational Health group, a McKinsey solution that supports clients in driving sustainable high performance through organizational alignment, execution and renewal. Michael is responsible for business development, delivery of services to senior executives of client organizations, and supporting team effectiveness.

Michael was a senior leader at Great Place to Work® Institute, the organization behind FORTUNE magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For in America®." At the Institute, he led the development of their global network and was their vice president for global business development. Michael also led consulting services for the Institute's US affiliate and provided change management consulting using the Institute's proprietary employee survey tool.

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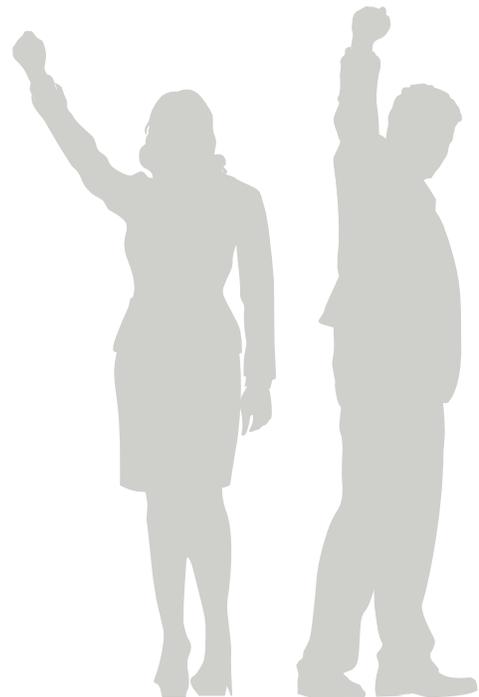
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