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Not A Happy Accident: How Google Deliberately Designs Workplace Satisfaction

By [Mark C. Crowley](#) [2]

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March 21, 2013

While much has been said about Google's enviable employee perks, those just scratch the surface of how it totally re-engineered traditional HR to ensure a happy and profitable workplace.

“Imagine a world where most organizations were the best place to work. Imagine what we could be getting done on the planet if it were true.”--Karen May, VP of people development, Google

Few businesses in the world's history have had as profound an impact on human life in such a short period of time as [Google](#) [3].

Pause to consider that just 15 years ago, Google's search engine, now used globally over 100 billion times a month, didn't exist. Products most of us take for granted, including Google Maps, Gmail, Translator, Google Earth, and Android all were created since 1998 when Larry Page and Sergey Brin cofounded the firm with the soaring ambition of making the world's information

available to everyone.

To punctuate the obvious, Google's inventive achievements in a mere decade and a half are simply stunning.

But in Google's short lifespan, it has also grown from a two-man startup to an organization with nearly 37,000 employees in 40 different countries. This notable and relentless workforce expansion begs the very important question: How have they successfully managed and integrated all these new people while concurrently motivating them to be consistently loyal, ambitious, innovative, and productive?

Over the past few years, the media's coverage of Google has given considerable focus to the incomparable--and seemingly over-the-top--perks the company bestows on its workers. We've all seen photos of the bowling alleys, billiard tables, and people getting free haircuts during work hours. We know everyone gets free food, gym memberships, and even Wi-Fi-outfitted shuttle rides to work.

Perhaps because so few of us can relate to an organization with this much generosity, we've instinctively judged them as an outlier. When we hear about Lego rooms and pets being allowed at work, we draw the conclusion that Google's phenomenal success, not to mention its top ranking on *Fortune's* "Best Places To Work" list for the past two years, is entirely a result of these seemingly extravagant benefits.

But this simply isn't the case.



What few in business know is that Google has devoted the same level of intellectual firepower it used to create self-driving cars to discovering, refining, and implementing leadership practices that optimize human performance in the workplace.

Upending traditional leadership theory, which directs organizations to squeeze as much out of people while paying them as little as possible, Google holds an authentic reverence for its employees and seeks to not just appeal to their uber-developed minds in motivating performance, but also to their very human hearts.

I've just returned from a visit to Google's global headquarters and from spending time with some of the people guiding the company's groundbreaking model of leadership--one that has helped its stock appreciate by over 650% since the firm's IPO seven and a half years ago. (The Dow Jones average is up by just 44% in the same timeframe).

Here are highlights of what I learned.

1. Being a great place to work is in Google's DNA.

In the company's early days, long before it had thousands of workers, Larry Page and Sergey Brin set their sights on making Google a truly great place to work. Determined to attract and retain great talent, they went in search of organizations that had proven histories of caring for people, driving extraordinary innovation, and building truly remarkable brands. Ultimately, they identified the SAS Institute (currently ranked as the best multinational company [4] to work for by the Great Place to Work Institute [5]) as being one company worth emulating.

""No one has ever asked us why we should invest in our people. Our leaders just assume it's the right thing to do.""

The Google founders met personally with SAS executives and sent a team of people to its headquarters in Cary, North Carolina. Collectively, they validated their understanding that people truly thrive in their jobs--and remain loyal to them--when they feel fully supported and authentically valued. This led to the launch of plentiful perks and a culture intentionally anchored by trust, transparency, and inclusion. Few, if any, businesses ever have been built with employee happiness as its cornerstone.

But in setting its sights on making employees contented, Google wasn't seeking a competitive advantage as much as it was trying to ensure its own sustainable success. According to Karen May, VP of people development, "it's less about the aspiration to be number one in the world, and more that we want our employees and future employees to love it here, because that's what's going to make us successful." In a striking irony considering the analytics the firm uses to make most of its business decisions, Google takes it on face value that employee satisfaction is a profound driver of performance. Prasad Setty, VP of people analytics and compensation, told me: "No one has ever asked us why we should invest in our people. Our leaders just assume it's the right thing to do."

Setty now manages a team of people whose primary purpose is to quantify the effects of all Google's perks and benefits. They rely on metrics to identify what employees most want and need. I kiddingly asked Setty if he makes a daily count of all bananas eaten on campus and he got distracted in giving me his answer. But, honestly, I'm pretty certain he does. Before he can support employee desires, he has to first know what they are.

2. Google ensures people have inspiring work.

Recently, the Conference Board discovered that the single greatest reason U.S. workers have grown so unhappy and disengaged in their jobs is because organizations design their work very poorly. Their specific conclusion is that the jobs we ask people to perform often lack sufficient variety and challenge. In other words, routine and repetitive work that affords little opportunity for growth and personal fulfillment dulls employee spirits.

But not at Google. For years, company leaders have given every employee--regardless of job title or pay level--the opportunity to devote up to 20% of their workweek to a project of their choice. Typically, Googlers choose to help out on some other company venture, but the pursuit is ultimately up to each employee.

A few years ago, engineer Chade-Meng Tan decided to reach as high as possible in this regard. His aim: achieve world peace in this lifetime. On the likely chance that this idea strikes you as quixotic or even a bit crazy, consider that no one at Google sought to dissuade him.

Fully committed to his cause, Tan recruited *Emotional Intelligence* author Daniel Goleman, in addition to a Stanford University professor and other business luminaries, to help him design a course on mindfulness [6]. Today, it is one of the most popular classes taught in the company, and Tan has written the *New York Times* best seller *Search Inside Yourself* in order to share his ideas with others. By the way, Tan and his primary work team still found time to create Google's mobile search capability.



3. Employees have uncommon freedom and control of their time.

Over a 40-year period, Sir Michael Marmot studied the health of Great Britain's government workers. He discovered that employees who had the least control over their work lives consistently had the poorest well-being and the highest mortality rates. His conclusion is that giving people greater control over when and how work gets accomplished leads to more optimal health and performance.

""We're harnessing energy rather than coaxing it out of people."

"One of the tenets we strongly believe in," says Setty, "is if you give people freedom, they will amaze you." Setty admits that this is quite a progressive idea--allowing employees greater discretion on work hours and when it's time to go to the gym, play volleyball, or get a massage. (Immediately following our 2 p.m. meeting, Chade-Meng Tan excused himself to take a shower.) But Google also is highly selective in its hiring, and purposely recruits ambitious people with proven track records of high achievement. "That means we're harnessing energy rather than coaxing it out of people," says Setty. But he also admits, "in the absence of that motivation, we'd be playing defense and worrying about people taking advantage of all this freedom."

But, at Google, all that autonomy comes with true accountability and employees routinely exceed management's expectations for producing exceptional work.

4. Google is a democracy and employees are given a significant voice.

Google has uncommonly aspirational ambitions (its mission today is to make people's lives better through technology and to do great things) that employees find especially motivating and inspiring. But doing significant work alone is insufficient to sustaining employee drive and commitment. Google's leadership team believes what's equally important is giving people true influence in how the firm is run.

"If you value people, and you care about them as whole people," says May, "one thing you do is give them voice, and you really listen." And listen they do.

The firm solicits employee feedback on everything from how they prefer to be compensated, to the design of new bicycles used throughout the expansive headquarters campus. Every Friday without fail, company leaders, including Page and Brin, conduct employee forums and respond to the top 20 most-asked questions.

But the transparency goes even deeper. Employees are given extraordinary access to company information, along with the trust that they'll always use it for good. When the firm formally surveys its workers each year, not only do 90% of them participate, but they ultimately see not just their own group's results, they see everyone else's (though privacy is protected). And when the firm takes action on the feedback employees collectively provide, they share all of that too.

"All of this defines the employer-employee relationship very differently" says May. "It creates a different kind of experience being here, and also then creates opportunities for us in what we try to solve together for the world. I think all those add up."

When I drove out of their parking lot late in the day, the thought ran through my mind that I'd just been exposed to the future of workplace leadership. At the same time, it also occurred to me that many of Google's uncommon practices and philosophies might strike some as being entirely

unworkable in their own organization.

Regardless of which way you're currently leaning, I'll leave you to ponder the words of Google CEO Larry Page: "Almost everyone who has had an idea that's somewhat revolutionary or wildly successful was first told they were insane."

--**Mark C. Crowley** is the author of [Lead From The Heart: Transformational Leadership For The 21st Century](#) [7]. Reach him on Twitter [@markccrowley](#) [8], [Facebook.com/leadfromtheheart](#) [9], and his website, [markccrowley.com](#) [10].

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