



Case Study: Julie Mueller

CEO of Custom
Design Benefits,
Cincinnati, OH

An Intentional Change in Culture

To set her company apart, Julie Mueller created a culture dedicated to extraordinary client service.

Despite receiving top workplace awards over the years, **Julie Mueller** noticed something was off with the culture at Custom Design Benefits. She detected a growing us-versus-them mentality that was driving employee disengagement at some levels.

The path forward became clear when Mueller saw David Friedman, CEO of High Performing Culture, speak at a Vistage meeting. After listening to Friedman's presentation, she realized she needed to define her company's culture to reflect her values.

Mueller brought in Friedman to help her redefine her company's culture and steer it back to one built on open communication, trust and clear expectations. After months of work, she implemented 23 behaviors for employees, naming them "The Custom Way." The fundamentals include honoring commitments, listening generously and speaking openly. The Custom Way also describes what Custom Design Benefits is, how employees do their work, and how they treat clients, partners and each other. In late 2018, Mueller held company-wide meetings with employees over 2 1/2 days, to help them adopt The Custom Way.

Mueller has seen a more trusting and positive culture emerge, a culture



Photo courtesy of Custom Design Benefits

she has intentionally created. Each week, the company focuses on one fundamental behavior and promotes how it drives success. Employees commend each other when they see these behaviors, while management evaluates and recognizes employees each quarter on these areas. It paid off: One of the 23 fundamentals is "own it," and Mueller has noticed more people taking on tasks that aren't necessarily their own. She hears employees say, "Let me take care of that."

Mueller says that she leads and builds trust through transparency. She shares the results of both employee and client satisfaction surveys with her team so they know where the company stands. Business leaders use The Custom Way to provide feedback and recognition. And while employees live the culture, Mueller knows that she has to be deliberate in how she sets the



Custom Design Benefits employees celebrate Wear Red Day for the American Heart Association.

tone. "It has to be from the CEO," she says.

In this year's "Best Places to Work Survey," five months after The Custom Way was implemented, Mueller was excited by how many employees gave engaged, laudatory responses about the new culture in the survey results. This led to Custom Design Benefits being once again named one of Cincinnati's Top Workplaces.

"Our employees are owning the culture," Mueller says. "It's got to come from the top, but now it's living and breathing in all of our employees. And that is the ultimate goal." ■



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