

Self-Storage News

CONFERENCE ISSUE 2019



OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE TEXAS SELF STORAGE ASSOCIATION



BIG *ideas* IN STORAGE

2019 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 13-15, 2019 | THE WOODLANDS WATERWAY MARRIOTT
THE WOODLANDS, TX

The Storage Office

What Is Your Company Culture?

Do You Know Your Duty When Renting to Military?

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE—

How You Can Learn from Terrible Professional Advice



FEATURES

- 24 The Storage Office**
 Does your company culture resemble The Office, Madmen or M*A*S*H? What behaviors and beliefs drive your company and how employees and customers are treated?
by Jason Meeker
- 30 Your Duty When Renting to the Military**
 What you need to know about the SCRA and renting to military personnel.
by Tracie Seed
- 34 Learning from Terrible Professional Advice... and Some Good Advice Too**
 Knowing when to run with clichéd professional advice and when to listen is a key to success. Deming addresses why some advice is really quite terrible.
by Scott Deming, TSSA Annual Conference Keynote Speaker

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 President's Message
- 8 Conference Preview
- 18 Members in the News
- 37 Self-Storage Solutions
- 41 Quick Tips
- 42 Managers Corner
- 44 TSSA Networking Luncheons
- 46 Ask the Experts
- 49 Bulletin Board/Ad Index
- 52 My Perspective
- 55 New Members



the **STORAGE** office

by Jason Meeker

TV shows based in the workplace are incredibly popular. Some seem to never go away following their initial run on major networks. They just live on forever widely syndicated or available on-demand.

We love them. We quote them. And we've all seen our favorite episodes countless times.

Close your eyes and imagine scenes and characters from "Parks and Recreation," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "30 Rock," "Madmen," "Scrubs" or even "M*A*S*H." What do they have in common? These shows are all set in places where the characters must interact mainly because they work together. Some get along while others fight. Some plot and scheme while others fall in love.

As we watch, we find ourselves either cringing, humored or horrified—maybe even all at the same time.

And that, of course, leads to "The Office." Indeed, "The Office" is one of the most popular shows of all time—even right now on Netflix. Anyone and everyone with a work history can relate on some level to the absurd antics and personality clashes that play out in the small branch office of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, Inc. in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Why does the corporate culture of a fictional paper company resonate with so many real companies? Because corporate culture is important and prioritizing it can make a real difference in whether a company thrives or not.

Corporate culture is not the same thing as a mission statement or any specific HR policy. In fact, it's rarely written out in any way. Corporate culture can include the behaviors and beliefs in a company that employees and managers follow when working together and also when serving customers. It covers a set of customs that are broadly implied rather than sharply defined. But once a corporate culture sets in, it affects everything from who gets hired to how work really gets done.

But what about the corporate culture of a self-storage business? How can self-storage businesses in Texas succeed at developing and maintaining a successful corporate culture

when facilities are located miles apart and employees work separate shifts. (Is there even a water cooler to gather around anymore?)

We posed those questions and others to several owners and operators of self-storage facilities in Texas to gain more insight into how corporate culture is a prime concern at every successful operation.

As you might expect, corporate culture varies greatly from one company to another.

John McAfee owns The Storage Place. His company has 25 employees and operates 12 self-storage facilities in cities in North Texas, including Terrell, Ferris, North Richland Hills and Seagoville.

McAfee is able to overcome some of the challenges of maintaining a corporate culture over hundreds of miles, because his company is family-owned and operated. While Michael Scott of Dunder Mifflin always attempted to treat his employees like family, McAfee

actually can.

McAfee gives his employees autonomy, freedom and flexibility to do their jobs and make decisions—all because of the corporate culture he's created.

He stresses the importance of letting his people learn from their mistakes in his company.

"The good news is, the decisions we're making are not life and death decisions. Worst case, they make a mistake and it costs us some money. And those are always good learning opportunities. We don't want to make mistakes, but I do tell everybody when they're hired, 'Listen, you're going to make mistakes, which is fine, so hurry up and make them as quickly as you can,' but just do them once," said McAfee.

While McAfee treats his employees like family, Trevor Diehl of Diehl Investments has built a corporate culture that treats his employees like business partners.

Diehl runs seven self-storage

What is your company culture?

While some self-storage companies treat employees like family, others choose to build a corporate culture that views staff like business partners.





Consider your best compliment.

“When I’m hiring, I’m looking for individuals who want to take on the business as if it were their own. I instill that in them from day one. The best compliment I can receive from a tenant is that they thought the manager was the owner.” — Diehl.

facilities: Texas Storage in Rosenberg, Royal Storage of Brookshire, Royal Storage of Pattison, Waller Boat and RV Storage, Waller Storage Center, Hockley Storage Center, and Texas Boat and RV Storage in Rosenberg. He has three full-time property managers and contract employees.

“I would say my corporate culture at this point is that we’re all in this together as business partners as opposed to an employment arrangement. And fortunately at this point now, I have not had any turnover in—knock on wood—six years now,” said Diehl.

Diehl also agrees that maintaining corporate culture begins with hiring the right kind of person for the job.

“When I’m hiring, I’m looking for individuals who want to take on the business as if it were their own. I instill that in them from day one. The best compliment I can receive from a tenant is that they thought the manager was the owner,” said Diehl.

When times get tough on “The

Office,” Michael Scott usually calls everyone into the conference room and starts saying precisely the wrong thing in an attempt to boost morale. Sometimes, people cry. Frequently, people are embarrassed. It usually makes things worse.

That’s not Melissa Stiles’ style at Storage Asset Management. Her company has six self-storage facilities in Texas, where they use competition to boost performance at all locations.

“We may start a Saturday with a message going out to all stores that first one to five rentals that day gets a \$50 gift card. We have key performance indicators that stores are measured by each month. The whole company sees the results. We also use an internal communication tool the managers use to have friendly competitions or help each other achieve their goals,” said Stiles.

And when one location has a problem with performance, everyone has a problem.

“If a store is not performing well, we have all-hands-on-deck to help improve the store,” said Stiles.

On “The Office,” Dwight Schrute would rarely be caught providing friendly customer service, nor was he much of a team player.

Teamwork is the name of the game for Sherrie Skeans and her husband, Mark, at their company, Skeans Development & Management. They manage seven storage facilities with 12 employees in south Texas. Skeans says her company is successful because their culture stresses customer service, building trust and success through teamwork—especially when times get tough.

“We are a team. [Our employees] are not left standing alone to handle all situations. We are consistent with policies, but we are also sympathetic to their personal needs. My assistant and I fill in whenever they need time off and even answer the phones after hours at most of the locations. That way, they know that their property and their tenants are being taken care of even in their absence,” said Skeans.

Skeans stresses the importance of making personal connections even in a business that can seem impersonal.

“We strive to give excellent customer service to the tenants at the facilities. Many of our managers have tenants who like to stop by to chat with the managers even when they are not conducting business,” said Skeans.

Corporate culture matters to employees too, according to Kerry Richard, SVP of Operations with Simply Self Storage. His company operates eight self-storage locations in the Dallas and Houston areas. Simply Self Storage has a strong focus on finding, hiring, developing and motivating employees.

“You start with the ad. You’re talking about your company. And then in the interview, and then the training, and then the follow-up training, and then the supervision. All of that starts at the ground level because our employees are really our company. We are definitely an employee-centered culture where our goal is to serve our team members to make sure they reach their goals that they’re looking for, whether it’s personal, professional... whatever their goals are. We want to help them in any

way we can. Not only to be successful with the company, but to be successful outside of the company too, in their personal lives,” said Richard.

Needless to say, it’s hard to imagine such an employee-centered culture at our favorite fictional paper company. That would be a funny episode.

Even still, the question has to be asked, why is that approach important to your company?

According to Kerry Richard, it pays in the long run for everyone when employees stay with the company and also when they leave to pursue a different endeavor.

“We want to make sure our employees have all the tools necessary to succeed in whatever they do. Turnover is a challenge. They might be here two or

Does your culture really match up?

If you asked each of your employees about your company’s corporate culture, would their answers match yours?

three years, or four years, or five years. But this may be a stepping stone for something else they want to do, and if we can help them get there, then that’s fantastic. We want our people successful in whatever they do,” said Richard.

Consider your own self-storage business. If you asked each of your employees about your company’s corporate culture, would their answers match yours? Would their answers reflect the behaviors and beliefs you’d

like them to follow when working together—or at different locations—and when serving customers?

There’s only one way to find out. Ask them today. ■

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