

managers (meat, deli, grocery, produce, bakery, customer service) exercise a moderate amount of power within their respective departments, though they control little more than making orders for their respective departments, creating a schedule for the department-specific employees, and fielding questions and complaints from disgruntled customers when necessary. Departmental employees make up the vast majority of the GS1 workforce and hold little power in decision-making.

GS1 gives its lower-level employees a quarterly satisfaction questionnaire called the Associate Voice Survey, or AVS, in which employees may discuss grievances regarding their working experience. Conceptually, this supports the quoted goal of treating their employees with dignity, value, and employment security.

Culture

Due to GS1's corporate structure, several subcultures exist underneath the stated culture. These subcultures do not always support the ideals set forth by GS1 as a whole.

Stated Culture

GS1 prides itself in accessibility between departmental employees and the management staff. The GS1 website cites Continuous Improvement Efforts, and Open-door Policy, and the Associate Voice Survey as boons to the general culture of the GS1 workplace. Based on these standards, GS1 describes its culture as innovative, frequently shifting to best meet the needs of its associates. GS1 cites "valuing the perspectives and opinions of associates" and "encourages associates to express their ideas and opinions."

High Turnover Rate

A dominant subculture with GS1 is the high turnover rate of managerial staff. It is distinctly common for a department manager to be employed at a particular location for a matter of months before being transitioned to a different store. This process is used both as a promotional and punitive instrument within the managerial hierarchy. High-performing managers will be moved to higher volume stores in more populated areas, while low performing managers are transferred to more rural locations with lower sales projections. This cycle creates an environment where lower volume stores serve as a "proving ground" for inefficient, ineffective, or underperforming management. This constant shifting in managerial employment can create a negative work environment for its managers, as a manager may be transferred to a store 50+ miles away with no negotiations accepted from higher-ups. After all, this is the only process by which a manager may "climb the ladder."

Each new managerial hire, be it departmental or general, generally trend toward a particular management style as per the guidelines of the company. However, as to be expected, each individual can have vastly different expectations as to how departments and their members ought to operate. Due to the described volatile managerial environment, "goal posts" are constantly shifting for what is to be expected from departmental employees. Expected hours worked, product sales expectations, opening and closing duties, and adherence to corporate guidelines are just a few of the constantly shifting metrics that may change in a matter of a few months.

Hours Scarcity

Another subculture within GS1 is a significant scarcity of workable hours. New hires are informed upfront that they will not initially receive full time employment at GS1. Full time employment may be achieved at a non-specific time in the future if the employee achieves a non-specific level of productivity. Employees are thus highly competitive within each department, vying desperately for full time employment. This can create rifts amongst employees, unintentionally fostering a toxic work environment within each department.

Department Managers recommend to employees seeking more hours to reach out to other departments within the store to be “cross-trained” within that department. While conceptually this would allow an employee greater access to workable hours within the company, every department is already battling to provide each of its department members with sufficient hours. In practice, there are very few opportunities for employees to achieve full-time status at GS1.

This scarcity of full-time employment is intentionally manufactured by GS1 to prevent employees from working overtime hours, thus costing the company more money for their work. A primary metric of success for departmental managerial staff is an extremely limited number of overtime hours worked by the department. To ensure that overtime hours stay as low as possible, managers will overstaff each department, ensuring that the average employee may only work two to three days per week. Employees that seek full-time employment may wait a year or longer before they are granted 40 hours per week, regardless of their effort or proverbial hoops that they may jump through.

Personal Experience

While my experience as a part-time employee (while being a full-time student) was generally positive, several aspects of the workplace culture struck me as distinctly negative.

Claimed Culture

GS1 purports an innovative, adaptable culture, where employee recommendations and creative ideas are rewarded. According to *Principles of Management*, “[companies claiming adaptable cultures] are characterized by a flat hierarchy and titles and other status distinctions tend to be downplayed” (Carpenter, Bauer, Erdogan, 2010). This description in no way accurately describes the present culture within the company. Titles and status distinctions are a dominant force in power structures within the company and largely determine who is given sufficient working hours. GS1 employs “Associate Voice Surveys” in order to minimize the veneer between Department managers and employees. However, these surveys act as little more than a ceremonial display of alleged empowerment of all employees. In my time as a GS1 employee, no tangible changes were made in response to the AVS's, even when complaints were made en masse.

Difficulties Regarding High Turnover Rate

As previously discussed, management staff would be transferred in and out very frequently. In my 12 months as an employee at GS1, I experienced 4 different department heads and 3 different general managers. In one period of 4 months, 11 managers or assistant managers were transferred out of the store and replaced by a new individual.

As previously stated, this creates a difficult environment in which an employee may succeed. Expectations are constantly shifting for each department. This especially creates a difficult environment for an employee to be given a raise.

Every 6 months, an employee is evaluated by their department manager on their progress over the previous 6 months. In my experience, the department manager who gave this evaluation had not been there for more than a month or two. This obviously would not give a manager enough time to gauge an employee's progress. In my one year at GS1, only 3 of the department's 14 employees were given a raise (as told to me directly by my department head) – the only three full-time employees.

Customer-Hyperfocus

I worked at GS1 in the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic. At no point during that time were mask mandates enforced, even when the CDC all but demanded it. Employees were not allowed to ask customers to wear a mask, nor were they allowed to ask them to leave the store for not complying with CDC guidelines.

Additionally, at the beginning of the pandemic, store associates were prevented from wearing masks while working to prevent customer panic. As a result, an elderly employee at a Florida GS1 location contracted Covid-19 and died. His family then sued the company.

GS1 willingly endangered its employees for the supposed betterment of its customers.

Conclusion

The GS1 supermarket is consistently considered to be a gold standard for supermarkets in the Southeast. However, the cultures within the store make full-time employment a nearly unattainable goal. Additionally, the volatile power structures within the company make employment challenging, as no path to progression is permanent. To counteract this, GS1 should minimize the transferal of managers to a minimum of 6 months or longer. Additionally, the company would benefit from giving transparency to new hires regarding the road to full-time employment. This would minimize disgruntled employees who feel as though they were misled when accepting the job in the first place.

GS1 successfully creates a positive working environment for a select few, while neglecting the majority of its workers. Due to my personal experience within this caustic culture, I would offer caution to those seeking to be employed by this grocery store.

Resources

Carpenter, M., Bauer, T., & Erdogan, B. (n.d.). *Principles of Management* (Vol. 1.1).

[Authors removed at request of original publisher]. (2015, October 27). *8.5 creating and maintaining organizational culture*. Principles of Management. Retrieved February 6, 2022, from <https://open.lib.umn.edu/principlesmanagement/chapter/8-5-creating-and-maintaining-organizational-culture-2/>