



Madison Environmental Group and Community Car

Meaningful: The extent to which an organization's purpose and mission resonates with employee beliefs and values.

Sonya Newenhouse has an underlying feeling that everybody is good. And it's a mindset that has served her well as president of Madison Environmental Group.

"Maybe I'm an eternal optimist, but you seek the good in people and the companies you're working with," says Newenhouse. A blend of her positive perspective and the purposeful work MEG is doing brought many current staff members to Newenhouse's bright, open third-floor office overlooking Capitol Square.

It was the impact their work was having in the community that attracted vice president David Waisman to MEG. The Wisconsin native and his wife were moving back to the Midwest from California and in need of employment. He was searching for a "green," sustainable business when he was referred to Newenhouse. "The projects they were doing kind of wove a fabric together that made Madison a great community. The combination of people, creativity and research orientation, while still being entrepreneurial is ... you don't see that very often."

The MEG office itself says a lot about what type of business dwells within. During a recent renovation they replaced cabinets, doors and lights with recycled materials, and the walls and floors were refurbished. The changes gave staff pride in knowing their company truly shared their love for the environment. Newenhouse calls it walking the talk, and when you do it in your own business it adds meaning to what you believe in.

There's also sense of nurture and playfulness that fills the office. Newenhouse keeps the refrigerator stocked with peanut butter, jelly and bread for hungry staff members. She also understands the need to feed their spirits with frequent fun. "We thrive on celebrations," she says. Birthdays, anniversaries, return to work after a vacation -- they're all fair game for bringing everybody together for a celebration.

That inclusive atmosphere goes on to spark great ideas. "We're serious about the work we do, but we can have fun and, in turn, the staff having fun makes the clients want to be more involved," says Community Car executive director Amanda White. Community Car is a great example of that spirit, too. What started as a MEG feasibility study has grown into its own car sharing business while still sharing office space and ideas with MEG.

Successes like Community Car drive MEG staff to create the next great idea. And staff involvement at all levels is encouraged on most every decision the business makes. Whether it's an employment interview or a brainstorming session, everyone is invited to participate.

"The person who's working on a totally unrelated project might bring the best idea to the table," says Waisman. It gives staff members ownership in the project and pride in knowing their ideas are valued.

Newenhouse believes organizations and people evolve through learning. It's through that evolution that creativity and new ideas come alive and encourage others to create, she says.

When those ideas get out to the community and put to use they tend to motivate others. Newenhouse recalled an inspiring instance when J.H. Findorff & Son project superintendent Rodger Galloway asked if a fire escape from the Capitol West deconstruction project could be given to a volunteer fire department that needed it. His idea was put to action when Findorff and The Alexander Company, who is developing the downtown condo project, split the cost to remove the 1,800-pound staircase.

Knowing they inspire people like Galloway makes everything they do at MEG so worthwhile, says Waisman. "It's not just our organization working in isolation; it's working together with all these different organizations that makes it that much more purposeful."

It's easy to see that involvement and fulfillment are important to Newenhouse. Free programs like the Car Free Challenge and the Earth Day Open House are opportunities to bring different people together, realizing that they have a common interest and care, she says. "It's not just ideas on a piece of paper. You're making a connection."

Joe Starr