

# Boozer

## "Dances Past the Elephants"

by Libby Maurer

On a winding industrial road in Columbia, SC, sits Boozer Lumber, a seemingly standard component manufacturing operation, product showroom and retail building supply store. The truss and panel shops each run one shift five days a week, employing over 130. The component and CAD design department totals 18 designers who crank out custom residential homes, tract homes and commercial structures, while about 85 other office staff handle accounting, administrative and sales work. But the rigors of "making it" in this business are secondary to the folks at Boozer. What distinguishes Boozer is the management team's notion that there is more to the employee's life than the nitty gritty, daily grind of working in this industry.

A closer look reveals they've come up with something very unique, maybe unprecedented, in an industry known for shaving nanoseconds off set-ups, crunching numbers to expand margins, and racing to catch up with ever-changing software technology. Reciting inspiring quotes like "personal accountability; the power of one," a vocabulary understood only by its employees, flow charts and diagrams illustrating interpersonal communication and psychological models, a CEO who warns managers not to let work get in the way of the "important stuff"? What are the chances this approach could distinguish this manufacturer from the rest? Turns out, the chances are good.

Unlike many of their contemporaries, Boozer CEO Bob Jones and his leadership team has adopted a progressive approach to sustaining their business: self-awareness. "When I came here in February 1991, I saw that the only sustainable competitive advantage for Boozer was for our people to learn and grow at a faster rate than our competition," says Jones. This was a perfect complement to the passion for lifelong learning held by the company's chairman and second generation owner, Dale Boozer. Their team's philosophy on sustainability is truly authentic, with a culture centered on the body's most complex organ, the human brain.

### If You Do What You've Always Done, You'll Get What You've Always Gotten

Boozer has but one thing in common with its competitors; in the mid-90s, the business grew nearly to excess, and production capacity was severely hampered by out-dated equipment and a technically-challenged staff. To address the inefficiencies, "we became specifically product oriented," explains Jones. This meant build-

### WARNING:

A strategy like Boozer's must have support and "buy-in" at the top of the organization. The leadership team must hold each other accountable for directing and demonstrating Class Act Behavior. The talk is useless without the walk.

### at a glance

- ❑ Boozer Lumber has taken a humanistic approach to employee training to accommodate the needs of a changing work force.
- ❑ The training strategy is vastly different from the traditional cerebral and academic-focused leadership training.
- ❑ One significant element of Boozer's training involves employees' career-long journey to self-awareness.
- ❑ The company's culture change has positively impacted its bottom line and has allowed Boozer to differentiate itself from the competition.



"...industry trends are telling us we must do something truly different to thrive."

—Keith Harris, Vice President of Sales Support

ing a brand new \$8 million truss plant. Overnight, Boozer's production capacity went through the roof. "At that point, our bottleneck was no longer manufacturing, it was design. Over the years we had hired several smart young folks to fill holes," says Jones. He noticed something very different about the new hires: they wanted more out of their careers than the previous generation had ever desired. "I realized that the future of this business was hiring smart and figuring out how to get them to stay," he says. And stay they did.

Employees yearned for, according to Jones, not only career growth but also personal development. Rather than disregarding their need for fulfillment beyond a 40-hour work week, Jones saw an opportunity for differentiation by injecting a healthy dose of Psychology 101 into the growing company's culture. This new strategy created a strategic byproduct: if Boozer employees operated seamlessly, solved conflicts without management intervention, and possessed the tools necessary to understand human triggers, reactions and tendencies, customers would actually derive more value. Another factor that influenced Jones' decision to facilitate a major culture shift was industry consolidation. "Jobs are being commoditized and so are people," he says. "The forces of commoditization do not lend themselves to the human spirit's hard-wired need to thrive. Consolidation might be good for shareholders, but not for the people who end up working in those bureaucracies," he says.

Under the leadership team's direction, the company's culture shifted from technical job-based learning to a more humanistic approach focusing on self-awareness and interpersonal relationship development. A lifelong psychology buff, the well-read Jones slowly began incorporating brain chemistry and communication models into Boozer's training sessions.

Keith Harris, Boozer's vice president of sales support, is quick to point out that prior to the culture transformation, Boozer has always been a popular place to work, which he attributes to the private, family-based company ownership since 1946. Dale Boozer and his family's reinvestment in not only the business but the individual employee's well-being is a well-known local story. "This has always been a good company to work for with a high retention rate. While that's a good thing, what happens is people who had been here for their entire careers could find themselves stuck in a rut, doing what they've always done. The company has always been innovative, but

industry trends are telling us we must do something truly different to thrive," explains Harris. A dangerous place for a company to be, says Jones. "That's why we started teaching about the human condition of wanting to feel comfortable and not wanting to change."

One of the most powerful resources Jones introduced is based on Dan Sullivan's Strategic Coach, a program "outfitting successful entrepreneurs with the direction, confidence, capability and focus to get to the next level in their business and the freedom and income to enjoy a unique quality of life." What Sullivan calls "The Gap™" is a cornerstone of Boozer's training model, designed to help people measure their progress on goals not by how far they've fallen short, but how far they've come. "It's human nature to fall short of our goals," Jones explains. "But measuring success in terms of how short we fall puts us in the negative zone." Sullivan's "gap" is simply a model for assessing goals in positive, tangible increments instead of spiraling into the gap of negativity. Boozer's employees often uses the phrase "failing forward" to recognize that while a goal may not have been completely met, the true success lies in any forward progress achieved.

### Crazy or Genius?

Jones is the first to admit to his employees that he "might be crazy." In fact, he flashes a slide at the beginning of staff meetings to warn that they might experience violent, negative emotional reactions during the session (due to "brain-stretching"). Staff is encouraged not to bury their emotions, but rather to push through them and figure out why they are having a particular reaction. "When you exercise your brain and allow yourself to open up to all the possibilities, there is no problem you can't solve. But it hurts a little at first," he explains.

Another expert in the field of psychology would further impact Boozer's cultural transformation. Jones became familiar with Dr. Glen Rediehs and the "Solution Focused Brief Therapy," a clinical protocol to treat psychotherapy patients. Jones saw something in this theory that triggered an idea so radical it made complete sense. He approached Dr. Rediehs about training him on the Solution Focus with the intent of implementing its principles into the business. Boozer's Solution Focus was introduced to employees in 1999, and the model is now used on a daily basis to solve conflicts and work through challenges.

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### Boozer Lumber "Dances Past the Elephants"

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The premise of Solution Focus is the "solution always walks in with the problem." Jerry Sandersfeld, a senior member of Boozer's design team, who has been with the company well before the culture shift points out, "No matter whether you are dealing with depression or negative attitudes, [Solution Focus] gives you a model to turn every negative situation into a positive." Sandersfeld says the key component encourages people to move quickly away from the problem. Instead of dwelling on the "why" or "who" of it, you learn to take the first small step in solving the issue.

## The solution always walks in with the problem.

### Hire the Smile, Train the Skill

Between 1999 and now, Boozer's inner focus has been fully-integrated into every facet of the business. Human resources manager Dale Berry has built the humanistic learning model into the hiring process, which gives candidates a taste of the culture right out of the starting blocks.

When designer Chris Collins applied for a technician position at Boozer, he was intrigued by the rigorous personality, IQ and technical skills testing. "It was an interview unlike any I'd ever had," he remembers. He quickly picked up on the probing personality questions and far-out scenarios he was asked to comment on. "It was more like a discussion than anything else. I could tell they wanted a sense for if I'd fit with the group's chemistry."

ing to make separate locations work together, I saw a real problem with the lack of teamwork," he says. Padgett remembers, for example, that the retail department wasn't "encouraged" to sell trusses. "I started telling employees that there isn't much difference between the retail department's goals and those of someone in design."

Padgett's desire to change the segregation of tasks between departments fit Boozer's Strategic Network management structure like a glove. Harris says during the hiring boom, "we did not want to institute a management hierarchy. We felt that people tend to harbor territorial feelings with that type of structure," he explains. The company needed to function much like a sports team; specialized positions lead by coordinators in pursuit of one common goal. So the Strategic

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—Bob Jones, CEO

A serial self-diagnosed job-hopper, Collins' M.O. was: 1) gain as much knowledge and new skills as possible at Company A; 2) look for a job with Company B and request a salary increase based on knowledge and experience gained at Company A; and 3) repeat Step 1 and 2 until retirement. He soon realized Boozer's culture was crafted to lasso the chronic job-hopper and give him the opportunity for continued career growth and personal development. It worked; Collins is thrilled with his progress in just

two years at Boozer. He's found a place where he can be himself, create his own career goals, share them with management, and contribute to a positive and thriving culture. "I don't see myself leaving," he says confidently.

### Company's Organizational Chart & Bottom Up Approach

When COO James Padgett came to Boozer, cohesiveness and teamwork were all but missing from the company's culture. The shortfall was instantly apparent to Padgett, who had spent much of his pre-Boozer career managing several Lowe's retail stores. "Coming from a place where I was try-

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Network replaced a functional hierarchy by involving a ring of people from different departments who meet on a regular basis. Padgett describes the network like the transmission of a high performance automobile. "Success in this type of organization cannot be achieved by micromanaging. Productivity must be leveraged through communication, delegation and trust."

Berry says, "Since we have no organizational chart to fill a certain number of positions with pre-determined job titles, it's allowed our culture to constantly evolve." Instead, Boozer employees are fitted with custom job titles based on their unique skill sets and talents. As a result, Berry, who's official title puts him in the HR department, has undertaken Boozer's recent marketing/branding overhaul. "It's crazy—we're changing up our graphics and our HR guy is designing the new logo!" exclaims Harris.

**Productivity must be leveraged through communication, delegation and trust.**

## Going Deeper—The Leadership Trust®

Shaking up the traditional management hierarchy may seem like a mere cosmetic change for Boozer. The leadership team went deeper, enlisting yet another expert in the field of psychology. Dr. Holly Latty-Mann, graduate of the University of South Carolina, Kent State and Duke University Medical Center, became involved with Boozer in 2003 when the group began attending her personalized leadership development program. Specializing in social psychology within the discipline of experimental psychology, Dr. Latty-Mann operates The Leadership Trust®, a company she co-founded. The management team became interested in her expertise with the mind-body-emotion connection and interpersonal relationship dynamics. "She is the single most powerful female I've ever met," says Jones. "She captivates the crowd."

"Leadership is so much more than self-knowledge; it's self-awareness," Holly says, describing her work as highly psychological humanistic leadership training. Most leadership training programs, she says, acknowledge the role of emotions in developing effective leadership skills. "But they also tend to be very academic and left brain oriented." She's convinced that people must become drenched in emotion in order to make a permanent change. As a workshop facilitator, she takes a gentle approach with her students. "I don't

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## Boozer Circle of Leadership

I feel that the Leadership Trust class is the key to helping or allowing us to achieve the goals and changes we have set forth or ourselves.

By teaching us to recognize the pitfalls or excuses (games), we subconsciously and consciously create, we can become more focused on the goals we have set for ourselves.

Exposing everyone to self awareness in a work setting has a compounding effect. So much so that once everyone recognizes their own triggers and short-comings, their environment will become a nurturing one and will allow everyone the freedom to accomplish goals, both personal and professional.

After repetitive completion of our goals, we can then gain confidence in ourselves and our abilities, so that in turn, we can create larger goals.

Confidence in conjunction with self-awareness, and understanding what is expected from you, and what is needed for the next person in line, creates an atmosphere of leadership on every level.

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use force. I don't use pressure. I just make the delivery of the information compelling."

Holly also recognizes that the old model of fear-training and leading by criticism just doesn't work anymore. "There's a very different breed in the work force today. [Generations X and Y] have minds of their own, they're much more demanding, and they want to be part of the decision-making process," she explains.

And just like an individual can turn a 180 by making a big change in his life, a company's "tipping point" manifests in a culture change. Holly says that has recently happened at Boozer. "Watching the company's metamorphosis has been thrilling. It's amazing what the human mind and spirit is capable of when we are open to change," she says.

Wayne Berry, vice president of business development, says Dr. Holly's work is an essential component of Boozer's self-awareness training. "For instance, technicians tend to be introverts by nature and not the most approachable people in the office. On the other hand, you have sales staff who aren't usually detail-oriented and operate on a 'fly by the seat of your pants' mentality. Realizing which personality type you are and knowing that the other person isn't going to change helps you understand everyone's interactions and relations," says Wayne.

Harris explains why perception is so important with an old saying: introverts think to talk and extroverts talk to think. "Understanding how people are hard-wired makes a big dif-

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—Keith Harris

ference when you are communicating with someone who has the opposite tendencies as you."

Through Dr. Holly's training, technician Matt Strickland learned a phrase that is paramount to active listening: "I understand." "I learned that repeating those words to the person talking to you acknowledges that you heard and have absorbed what they're saying," he says. "Everyone needs to be heard; it's as basic a need as food and water."

Strickland appreciates the Boozer model of humanistic training because it allows for—if not encourages—employees to present their own entrepreneurial ideas to management. "For instance, I can see the big picture of just how all this training can impact the company." After a recent course, Strickland was inspired to draft a paper on the company's philosophy on self-awareness (see sidebar).

Boozer has since implemented Strickland's assessment of what self-awareness can do for their team into a PowerPoint® presentation used at employee training sessions.

### What about the Real Work?

A company that has invested in its employees' personal development is great and all, but how can it afford to fund a colossal

## A company's "tipping point" manifests in a culture change.

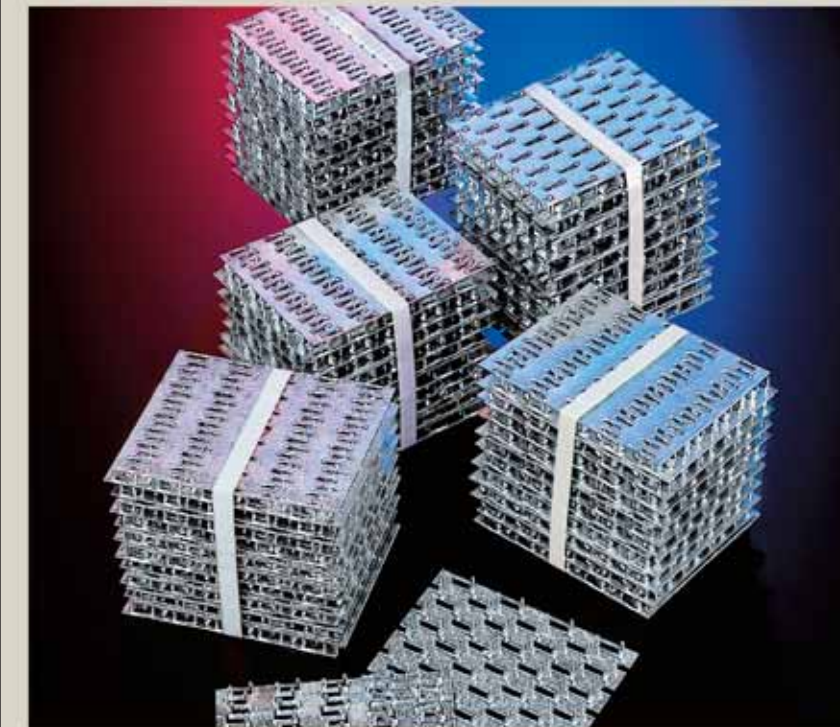
training effort and allow staff to take time away from their usual work while tending to customer demands? Dale Berry says that question isn't even a factor anymore. "Yes, we give a lot of seminars to employees on company time, and yes, it's a big investment." Berry notes that job and personal development are integrated whenever possible inside Boozer's train-

becoming self-aware. "We try to be practical about getting work done, but the real management focus is on personnel development." On the personal front he says, "If you're someone who tends to blow up, and you've taken a self-awareness class and now realize what triggers your reactions, you can use that knowledge in future interactions.

ing process. "It's really become institutionalized. It's not something we do in addition to doing our jobs, it's how we do our jobs."

Harris echoes Jones' catchphrase of not letting work get in the way of

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That's a huge milestone for some of us." Harris explains that on the corporate level, "the choices for a family owned company in today's industry are limited. The Boozer family can sell out or create something truly unique to keep the company growing into the future." Jones and the Boozer family refuse to accept the first alternative. To build for the next 60 years, they intend to then tap the entrepreneurial spirit of a new generation of stakeholders. They see that next generation as knowledge workers who are looking for something more than just a paycheck.

Berry says even down to the hiring process, time spent on determining how a candidate will fit with the organization's culture and chemistry is not an impediment. "You have to train yourself out of that mindset," he explains. "Invariably, the hire doesn't work in the long run if you don't follow the process from day one."

### Boozer-speak

Down to water cooler conversation, the staff at Boozer speaks a language of self-awareness that reinforces another tool called the Flywheel Effect. That is, synergy among staff creates a positive upward spiral that builds on its own momentum. Words like "awareness," "cultivate," "failing forward," "solution," "focus," "trigger," "doom loop," "personal hedgehog," "class act behavior" and "active listening" are staples in the Boozer vocabulary, and employees have no time for those who suggest they may have been brainwashed with fancy psycho-babble terms. "Even the most resistant people [to learning self-awareness] didn't take long to admit this approach works," says Collins. "These words mean more to me than they ever did prior to working at Boozer."

Another new one in their vocabulary? Don't laugh: Boozer University. Dale Boozer, who is also a college professor at the University of South Carolina, hails from a long line of teachers. His mother and father brought their passion for education to the business. Not long ago, the company created a team of facilitators including Padgett, Berry, Harris and others on the management team. The L3 (life long learning) concept was rolled out in the Goal Cultivator™ program, an optional course offered to every employee. "Students" actually pay tuition in exchange for monthly goal-setting meetings and personal coaching sessions. The program is designed to help employees both in and outside of the workplace. How many employees opted to enroll? Over 70.

### 'Dancing Past the Elephants'

Acknowledging criticism of the company's radical approach to training, Padgett admits the more humanistic employee development model is often looked at as a "soft" management style. "But it also establishes really strong contracts between people who trust each other and are able to have truly honest conversations," he says. "Our employees have a strong understanding of what is both expected and acceptable." And he's got several hundred employees to back him up. Dale Boozer says his intent is to "introduce both motivation and some specific techniques to keep the fires of intellectual curiosity burning forever." It looks like this may be working. Remember Jerry Sandersfeld, the technician who has spent 12 years of his career at Boozer? "Exposing people to [this type of learning] allows them to stretch. For those who feel like they've had their brains muzzled or compressed by their environment, it seems like once placed in fertile soil, they thrive," he comments.

If thriving in this industry really does come down to Dale Boozer's passion for life-long learning and his leadership team's commitment to self-awareness, we all could stand to learn a thing or two from Boozer. While the rest of us ponder this strategy of sustainability, Boozer (as Jones puts it) "dances past the elephants." **SBC**

*To learn more about Boozer's culture shift, contact Keith Harris at [kharris@boozerlumber.com](mailto:kharris@boozerlumber.com). A list of resources described in this article can be found in **Support Docs** at [www.sbcmag.info](http://www.sbcmag.info).*



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