

“ WE GO IN WITH THE PHILOSOPHY THAT WHATEVER WE ARE GOING TO OFFER OUR EMPLOYEES, WHETHER IT IS AN INVESTMENT IN THEIR BENEFITS AND THEIR WELLNESS, THEIR ENGAGEMENT, IT IS THE SAME WHETHER TIMES ARE GOOD OR NOT AS GOOD. IT CREATES A LOT OF TRUST WITH OUR EMPLOYEES THAT WE DON'T SWING FROM A CADILLAC VERSION TO SOMETHING LESS WHEN THINGS AREN'T AS GOOD — MARK RAZZOLINI, HUMAN RESOURCES V-P



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ALBERTA BLUE CROSS

Official 2015 Alberta Blue Cross employee group photograph: Each year, employees at headquarters in Edmonton take a break, head down to street level and join in on a team photo.

Taking the high road to prosperity

ALBERTA BLUE CROSS

PAUL BRENT

An unwavering belief in their employees' passion, skills and ability to innovate has set Alberta Blue Cross apart as one of the province's top employers time and time again.

"We are very transparent about who we are as a company. We make it very clear from the beginning when a new employee joins us that we are the kind of company that sets a standard in good times that we are going to consistently maintain. There is a real trust that, as an employer, when we give our word we stick to that — because of that, there is a lot of trust with our employees," says Mark Razzolini, vice-president of human resources.

The HR chief notes "this is a key differentiator, and we believe this is why people stay with us for the long term. We have our good days and we have our challenges, but in the end our employees know that we offer the great things we do because we believe in them."

Alberta Blue Cross was recognized as one of Canada's 10 Most Admired Corporate Cultures in the Broader Public Service category for 2015 by Waterstone Human Capital. The Alberta-based organization received high marks for its vision and leadership, performance and retention, among other attributes.

The most important measure of employee satisfaction, namely engagement, is measured annually and the organization typically scores above 80 per cent in those surveys, which is "the platinum stan-

dard" for engagement results, Razzolini says.

Maintaining high employee engagement is a priority for the company, especially as it steadily grows from year to year, welcoming new faces to the team of more than 1,000 individuals currently employed across the province. This size is put to good advantage: it ensures that every employee has the opportunity to grow with the organization.

"We know that people want to be challenged and move around in their careers; they expect that, actually," explains Razzolini. "We've made sure that we create those opportunities and ensure that (for) people who demonstrate that they have the skill sets and the drive, that their careers will grow right along with them."

Alberta Blue Cross utilizes an annual best-practices succession planning and leadership development process that includes all members of its executive team.

"Employees are tooled with a customized succession plan that helps them get where they want to go," says Razzolini. It is a process that serves as a model for many employers. "We have other companies look to us and ask us about our process, because it is first-rate. This is a huge benefit to the organization as we have a pool of talented employees ready to step into a leadership role at any time."

The commitment to growing their employees' careers has resulted in very low turnover with the organization; a result that is noteworthy in a province where it was extremely hard to hang on to great staff during the previous economic boom.

"At Alberta Blue Cross it is not unusual to see employees

staying with us for 20 years or more; it is not an anomaly," Razzolini adds.

One such long-service employee is Ron Hepburn, manager of technical architecture and infrastructure planning, who has worked for Alberta Blue Cross for 22 years. He began working with the organization as a summer student in the IT department and has worked his way up into a management position.

"I always found that from a culture perspective, Alberta Blue Cross has always been very supportive in letting us try new things and go in the direction that we want to go," he says.

Over his career, Hepburn has held 11 different positions within the organization and his career path has been propelled in part by a cornerstone belief in financially supporting continuous learning.

As Razzolini explains, "the focus is on continuous growth

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of people. Alberta Blue Cross pays for up to \$4,000 worth of professional development each year."

Now a manager, Hepburn is in the position of recruiter, often highlighting for prospective employees the benefits of working for Alberta Blue Cross.

"I always tell people it is like a family here. It is a very supportive atmosphere; you make a lot of friendships for life. We have many people who have been here for 30-plus years," Hepburn says.

"I think that is because they really enjoy the culture and the atmosphere."

A competitive salary and benefits package, including a generous defined benefits pension plan, provides Alberta Blue Cross with a decided advantage when it comes to recruiting and retaining employees.

The organization also provides its employees with health-and-wellness spending accounts that can be used for health-related activities such as gym memberships, vacation expenses and national park passes.

"Our employees see the value of a plan like this because not every employer offers it," notes Razzolini.

Alberta Blue Cross has been very successful in attracting and retaining the newest generation to the workplace, the so-called millennials, who are often described as a group that flits from job to job and is hard to

leader and assigned a project designed to create innovation within the culture.

"Often, our younger leaders are pushing innovation, so why not tap into this dynamic generation?" says Razzolini.

One of those young leaders at the organization is Sarah Routledge, manager of group enrollment and billing in Edmonton. Now, 32, she started with the organization at 18 and worked her way through a number of progressive positions.

"I have been able to work with some amazing people who have continued to challenge me, give me a lot of opportunity to grow, and take courses to expand professionally as well."

She notes that Alberta Blue Cross is very selective about who they hire on, looking not just for skills and ability but also seeking out individuals who are a good "fit" with the organization's unique DNA. "We look at fit and we look at people who are going to live and breathe our culture."

An example of how close and inclusive the organization is was brightly illustrated for Routledge recently when she attended her first company management meeting.

The gathering included about 80 managers, from the CEO to vice-presidents and managers such as herself. "I looked around the room and there were just two people I did not know, and one just started that week."

Support for professional and personal development goes beyond generous funding for courses. Routledge recently chaired the organization's annual United Way campaign, which highlighted her leadership skills.

"Even just the ability to —

on company time with other like-minded people in the organization — work toward a charitable initiative, raising money, or reaching out to the community helps you grow," she says.

Another example of how the organization gets employees involved in their community is through the long-running employee-operated and funded Hearts of Blue charity. Created in 1998 as a one-time 50th anniversary event, it was so well-received that it became an ongoing part of the group's community involvement. In 2014, Hearts of Blue contributed more than \$35,000 to charities across Alberta.

It organizes the charity facilitates volunteer initiatives for Alberta Blue Cross employees and collects donated items such as food, clothing and furniture to organizations in need.

In recent years, Hearts of Blue has assisted numerous registered charities, including the Youth Empowerment Support Services, inner-city seniors' organizations, women's shelters and children's educational programs.

"We're so proud of our employees' leadership on these types of initiatives. They put into practice one of our key beliefs: we live in the communities we serve and we serve in the communities we live," Razzolini says.

Alberta Blue Cross recently adopted a 10-year vision plan that Razzolini describes as ambitious.

"We are transforming as an organization, much bigger and bolder. Not just provincially but nationally as well. Our employees have always been critical to our success, but more now than ever before."



Congratulations to all of our incredible employees. Together, we have created one of Canada's 10 Most Admired Corporate Cultures.

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