

## Promoting Collaboration — Not Competition — Among Employees

Posted By Kelly Spors On December 15, 2008 @ 2:40 pm In [Team-Building](#), [Recruiting](#), [Innovation](#), [Leadership](#), [Employee Ownership](#), [Competition](#), [Employee Policies](#), [Top Small Workplaces](#) | [2 Comments](#)



*Editor's note: On Mondays, we'll be interviewing 2008 Top Small Workplaces winners about their companies and the unique workplace practices that help make them successful. You can read the full 2008 Top Small Workplaces package [1] [here](#). You can also nominate a business for Top Small Workplaces 2009 [2] [here](#).*

At most companies, there are big incentives to being in management: most notably, more authority and better pay. But leaders at ATA Engineering, a San Diego-based engineering consulting firm, feel too much hierarchy gets in the way of camaraderie, innovation, office morale and other things that help a business stay competitive in this tough world.

The company, which is 100% employee owned, involves many employees in major decisions, such as interviewing job candidates or choosing whether to change office locations, and pays all managers on an engineering pay scale – so they don't make astronomically more than their reports.

We caught up with President Mary Baker about ATA's collaborative culture and the benefits it offers. Here are edited excerpts of our conversation.

### **WSJ: ATA puts a lot of emphasis on group decision-making and having a flat culture. Why is that so important to you?**

Look at the auto industry. When Henry Ford was setting up the production line, they were trying to get as many cars out as quickly as possible. That was what it took. But generations later, that's not enough. What the foreign auto companies have done is enabled individuals to contribute on every level. I think it's a necessity of being competitive today that you need to be able to tap the thinking of everybody in the organization. One person can't be all knowing. At ATA, we try very hard not to need very much management because the individuals have enough information, enough tools, enough skills to make the right decisions. Most big companies suffer from communications issues, but that's an advantage to being small.

### **WSJ: The risk to that is employees don't make the right decisions. How do you deal with that?**

You try to give them enough information. We write standards of performance for each employee and set goals for each one so that the whole team is pulling in the right direction. It's also a lot of training and emphasis on sharing tools and information.

We don't do a lot of incentive or performance-based compensation. We feel that creates competition between people. We try to encourage a feeling of shared ownership.



**WSJ: What are the challenges to getting people to collaborate at work? Aren't some people naturally competitive?**

The biggest challenge is finding good people, because what you're really depending on in this type of environment is their values, abilities and attitudes. I think it's more than talent or skill. It's getting people with the right attitude, people who want to be part of a team and who find that exciting, those who love engineering and who want to make a difference.

Part of how we find people is taking on many paid interns. They get the benefit of learning and we get the benefit of finding out whether they fit in with our culture.

*Readers, would you like to work in this kind of environment? What does your company do to promote collaboration?*

---

Article printed from Independent Street: <http://blogs.wsj.com/independentstreet>

URL to article: <http://blogs.wsj.com/independentstreet/2008/12/15/promoting-collaboration-not-competition-among-employees/>

URLs in this post:

[1] here: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122347733961315417.html>

[2] here: <https://secure.winningworkplaces.org/topsmallbiz/2009/nominations/index.html>

Click [here](#) to print