



2007 Pacesetter Award Winner

Abacus Planning Group, Inc. Columbia, South Carolina

In less than ten years, Abacus Planning Group has grown from serving a handful of clients with a 2-person staff to a 16-person firm overseeing more than \$500 million in assets for 145 clients. President Cheryl Holland has been included five times on *Worth* magazine's annual list of the Top 100 Wealth Advisors in the nation. She credits the firm's rapid growth to its client-centered approach. "We always try to act as if the client is sitting in the room with us," says Holland.

Through formal surveys and informal discussions, clients help shape the firm's offerings. After every client meeting, Holland says, "What can we do differently next time or what should we do better?"

Investing in a culture of ownership

While Abacus has a reputation for being an early adopter of new technologies, Holland points to the culture—one of its "most precious commodities"—as a key to her firm's advantage. "We invest heavily in team members and we very much have a team approach to client service," says Holland. Every client has a three-pronged relationship with Abacus that includes an investment advisor, a financial advisor and a principal.

Abacus's investment in its people is driven by the group's strategic plan. By establishing a compensation philosophy, mapping out career paths, agreeing upon cultural norms and developing an annual incentive program, the plan has set the pace for growth in more ways than one.

The firm incorporates a number of practice management strategies to enhance the culture and develop employees who can help the firm grow. For example, a career path model encourages employees at each career stage to participate in the management of the business. In addition to core professional or administrative responsibilities, each team member serves on one of four business teams: CFO, marketing, operations and human resources.

Employees are compensated for participating on a team and achieving team goals. The firm's adoption of an open-book management system combined with this collaborative approach to management has established a culture of ownership.

Abacus University

The firm is committed to professional development. "Abacus University" involves a one-hour meeting every Monday covering key topics every firm member needs to know. Firm employees take turns teaching. One week the topic might be about the firm's private-client Web page, another week it's about how to review an income tax return. The classes are required for new employees and open to senior employees who want a refresher. In addition, each professional team reviews a case study weekly and attends a monthly two-hour continuing education session with a guest speaker from the community.

Each team also has its own extensive reading list. "You want every client, no matter who their team members are, ideally to get the same level of expertise and the same consistent service," Holland says. "And the only way to do that is through continual training and mentoring."

Another professional development component is a "Deep Smart" program, named after a *Harvard Business Review* article. It's an annual employee exchange with another wealth management firm. "By spending a week immersed in another firm's culture, business model and unique method of service

delivery, we have found an employee can take a quantum leap in productivity and become a font of new ideas within our firm," Holland says.

Adapting to rapid growth

Holland passes along four best practices that have enabled Abacus to adapt to rapid growth:

- **Know your culture, define it, live it.** "We know what our culture is," she says, "and I think that helps with hiring and retaining great people."
- **Embrace change.** "In a rapidly changing market you have to realize it's going to get chaotic from time to time," Holland says. "You're going to have to reinvent yourself."
- **Take a break.** "If you've worked here five years, you get a one month sabbatical and you're not allowed to do anything related to work," Holland says. "This is a very fast-paced industry with a high demand. I think it's critical to recharge your batteries."
- **Aim high.** "Go for the gold and imagine what the future could be like," she urges. "If you have the goals and ways to measure them, you're much more likely to succeed."

Planning for the future

The firm has a five-year vision to grow revenue at least 25 percent per year to support team members' career goals. To accomplish that, Abacus invests in three key areas—business development, human capital and technology. Abacus also has a more tactical three-year strategic plan for increasing revenue and maintaining profitability by attracting their ideal client.

"We always try to think about what our clients need and what we need to be learning," says Holland. "We focus on what the future is going to mean for our clients. And I think that sets us apart from the competition."

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