

Questions for: Dwayne Clark

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Dan Schlatter

Rock guitarist-turned-motivational speaker Carlos Santana, right, with CEO Dwayne Clark of Aegis Living. Santana spoke at the Aegis annual meeting in Seattle.

Dwayne Clark is founder and CEO of [Aegis Living](#), a Redmond-based senior housing giant. Known for his drive for positive workplace culture, every year Clark holds an employee-focused event featuring motivational speakers, including celebrities such as this year's lineup of **Carlos Santana, Marianne Williamson, Harry Belafonte** and **Ted Kennedy Jr.**

You're known for your workplace culture, and for striving for staff satisfaction. what exactly does that mean to you? Corporate culture means everything. It's the essence of why great companies are great. As a CEO you can be brilliant, hire brilliant executives but it's really the person, the line staff that's touching the customer every day that makes the difference. What we all know as CEOs is that the typical bonus/benefit/perk is a short-lived motivator. What you have to do is create something that lives organically within your company. So it's how you're treated; one of the things that is incredibly important is just how we treat each other as human beings.

Those kinds of workplace values sound great, but how do you get your employees to adopt and own them? I think part of it is an attitude or philosophy, and that has to come from the top. It has to come from the CEO. We've coined a phrase: management by vulnerability. As leaders, as CEOs, we have to be more vulnerable with ourselves. You'll often hear me talking to my staff about me struggling with my weight, credit problems, bad relationships, bad decisions I've made — whatever — because that's a vulnerability that people can go, "He's more like me than not like me."

Every year Aegis spends a lot of money renting a nice venue, with good food and prominent speakers. Why do you do that? Things like Epic, this conference, we take a timeout with people, we're talking a lot about hitting the pause button. (We're asking) "Is this who I want to be? Is this the company I want to be with? Is my life fulfilling?" At the end of the day, if you end

up with a pool of people who just love working for your company, God, what a great place to be. A great organization, happy people, and it goes without saying: Happy people are more productive.

How can you gauge the effectiveness of motivational programs like this? Well, I can give you quantitative things; I can tell you that the average turnover in my industry is 126 percent and we'll do 31 percent this year. I can tell you we have the highest price points in the industry of anyone. I can tell you we have the highest profitability margins within our industry — is that an accident? I don't think it is.

Could a smaller company with fewer resources do something similar that would be just as effective? We started with four people. We haven't always been a big company, but we've always put a lot of emphasis on the culture. It starts from the minute you recruit — how your ad is written, the story you tell people about who you are, who you want to be, and how this company walks in the world — it starts there.

You've obviously thought long and hard about workplace culture and motivation. Tell us the story of how you got interested in this. I think companies and cultures are reflections of their CEOs. We want our company and our culture to be reflective of our values and beliefs. And I want to work in a place that I'm proud of. If those are my values, then I have a responsibility as the CEO and founder of the company to build the culture that espouses those values.

In a recent blog post of yours (aegisliving.blogspot.com), you have some advice from a CEO standpoint for executives who are interviewing for positions in a state with a 9.7% unemployment rate: what is it? You know, I think we have always been a country of incredible prosperity, and even in our worst of times, it's better than most countries in the best of their times. So I have a theory that that's created an apathy or laziness amongst American cultures that we have to get over if we're going to compete on a worldwide screen. And I think that's reflective of people who come interview for me. I'm talking guys who come in for six-figure jobs that are lazy. Lazy about doing research on the company, lazy about doing their homework, lazy on finding out the company's goals and motivations, lazy about talking to competitors — whatever. And I think if people really want to get a job, they have to show more than an interest of going to your website.

In growing Aegis, you've studied the business models of successful Northwest corporations such as [Costco](#), [Nordstrom](#) and [Starbucks](#). What's been your biggest takeaway? If you look at all three of those companies, Nordstrom is known for its service culture, Starbucks is known for its innovation, Costco is known for its treatment of employees. All three of those are really people-centric issues. I think probably the thing most businesses avoid, and most venture capitalists overlook, is really the people business plan. People are the path to profitability.

Who's your favorite celebrity you've invited to an EPIC event? Why? If you said, hey, you could be on an island with one of these people, it'd be probably be (author) **Wayne Dyer**, 'cause he just has such a great philosophy on life."