

Serious Play at the Make-A-Wish Foundation

Part A

You are brought into a local chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation as an external consultant to analyze the impact of its organizational culture on employees, volunteers, and outside partners. After you observe the workplace and interview people in and outside the organization, you are preparing to inform leaders about the culture. As you enter the organization for the first time, you can instantly see that play is taken very seriously at Make-A-Wish. The CEO refers to herself as the Fairy Godmother of Wishes, and she introduces you to the office manager, whose business card lists her as the Sweetheart of Structure & Salutation, and the regional director in charge of finance, who calls himself the King of Cashola. The staff holds candy-themed meetings, the office is full of toys, and the employees are constantly smiling and laughing. How do you even begin to analyze this organization's unusual culture?

The Make-A-Wish Foundation (MAW) was founded in 1980 to fulfill a meaningful mission: “to grant the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions and enrich the human experience with hope, strength, and joy.” Since its inception, MAW has granted the wishes of over 162,000 children. Today, nationwide, MAW includes several thousand employees and a network of more than 25,000 volunteers. In the United States, a child’s wish is granted by MAW every 40 minutes. According to one employee, “The foundation’s mission reflects the life-changing impact that a MAW experience has on children, families, referral sources, donors, sponsors, and entire communities...The commitment level is unparalleled.”

Children can choose from four types of wishes: “I wish to *be*” (e.g., the girl who wished to be a princess for a day at Disney World); “I wish to *go*” (e.g., the boy who wished to go to Yellowstone National Park); “I wish to *meet*” (e.g., the child who wished to spend a day with Tiger Woods); and “I wish to *have*” (e.g., the teenager who had the concept car that he designed actually built by GM engineers). A social worker explains, “Make-A-Wish makes a huge difference in kids’ lives. When there isn’t a cure, there is still something positive in their lives to look forward to.”

MAW has a centralized national office, but the actual nuts and bolts of the wish granting is done by 69 local chapters that operate mostly independently from one another. The Michigan chapter is renowned for

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