

# Tarrant Business

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## Attitude follows gratitude

**An engineering firm believes that work-life balance builds a strong team**

By J.G. Domke  
Special to the Star-Telegram

Engineers have to be logical. They can't play around when it comes to designing highways that take years to complete and must be safe for thousands of vehicles a day while withstanding freezing weather and the Texas sun.

But it's OK for engineers -- and their co-workers -- to take an occasional break from their exacting labors and get appreciated for a job well done.

That's why taking workers into account is a matter of policy at Teague, Nall & Perkins Engineers in downtown Fort Worth.

Gary Teague, the only founder still with the firm, says that from the beginning -- and when John Nall started in 1976, and when Dick Perkins joined in 1979 -- the partners wanted the workplace to be a home away from home.

The company began giving cash bonuses for jobs well done by workers who helped design and build highways, bridges tunnels and water systems.

That presented problems when the Texas economy was hit hard in the '80s. Projects were put on hold, and the partners had to take pay cuts. But they still searched for other ways to show their appreciation for employees who strived to satisfy clients' needs.

Company officials point to findings in a recent British study: "When an individual's rights to a fulfilled life inside and outside work is accepted, it results in a motivated, satisfied and equitable workforce."

Their efforts began to include the simple and the extravagant in order to build what many refer to as a healthy "work-life balance."

They provided workers with shaded parking for cars, a vending machine that sells soft drinks for 25



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Gary Teague, president of Teague, Nall & Perkins Engineers, believes it's important to incorporate some stress relief for employees.

cents and gourmet coffee in five flavors, free to workers.

Working on a project once meant all of the engineers working together in a large room. But TNP gave every engineer his or her own private office. Employees who sit behind the computer for hours have an exercise and weight room to help get the blood flowing.

And because the company splits its 97 workers among three offices in Fort Worth, Denton and Dallas, there was a risk that one office might feel ignored.

So Teague works to make everyone feel like they are part of the company "family."

In planning the annual family picnic, which took place last month, partners aimed to provide plenty of food and activities for the whole family. At Christmas, the company holds a formal dinner, for adults only, where attendants play *Jeopardy* to win TNP "money" they can use to bid on prizes.

The company has taken pains to address worker stress that may have roots outside the workplace; a chaplain visits the office every month.

When a new engineer and his family moved here from California, the chaplain helped arrange someone to care for his mother, who had been rushed to the hospital, Teague said.

Other efforts at alleviating stress seem to be aimed at having fun.

Because most of its engineers are alumni of either Texas A&M or Texas Tech, TNP families and clients gather in the parking lot for a tailgate lunches on game days during football season.

And while others wondered who was going to win in the NBA championship, employees at TNP cheered for three-on-three basketball teams competing for the company trophy.

The rapid growth in north Texas has meant work for civil engineers, and it has helped TNP diversify to offer high-tech surveying services to builders, and community planners.

But the company has continued to adapt to ensure that it gains business, even when the economy is flat.

It added landscape architecture to its repertoire and won a contract to design an outdoor theater, lake and park next to Keller City Hall.

With the computer replacing the drafting board, employees turned what they learned in setting up their office network into a marketable commodity, becoming consultants and helping their clients set up their own systems.

Worker training is important, too.

To be ready, the company annually spends \$5,400 per employee on training and professional development, Teague said.

"It's our investment in our employees, so they stay current in latest developments, and also have the potential to advance to new levels of competency and responsibility," he said.

The initiative is a reflection of the company's proactive business philosophy, TNP Vice President Mark Berry said.

He believes it is a mistake for businesses to simply say, "What do we know how to do, and who can we sell it to?"

The better question, he said, is, "Where is there a need, and how can the need be met?"

That kind of resourcefulness may have helped the company when the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act became law in 2003.

TNP started training in risk assessment methodology for water utilities, and it will now evaluate threats facing community water supplies to establish safeguards against terrorist attacks.

After six months of planning, TNP last month introduced another way to say thanks to workers. Anyone, not just the boss, can recommend a colleague to be rewarded for going out of the way to help. They get TNP points, which can be traded for meals or saved for bigger prizes.

"We [managers] can't see everything going on," Teague says.

Encouraging innovation, teamwork and fun, Berry says, "keeps employees happy, which in turn achieves optimal performance and best serves clients."

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