



For This Award-Winning Benefits Firm, Engagement Comes From a Commitment to Commitment

Focus is Borne Out in Agency's Enviably Record of Customer Satisfaction and Retention



Even after 35 years, Tom McGraw doesn't claim to have seen it all. But when it comes to creating, building—and even selling organizations focused on employee group benefits consulting—he's seen a lot of it.

McGraw, CEO of [Marsh & McLennan Agency - Michigan](#), sees today's focus on employee engagement as a refinement of what has been called commitment. His quest for commitment plays a role in the people he hires and promotes. It shows up, he says, in an employee-client "moment of truth" that has helped his firm to an amazing 97 percent client-retention rate. This commitment to commitment also has made MMA Michigan one of the region's [Top Workplaces](#).

As its name implies, MMA Michigan is part of [Marsh & McLennan Agency LLC](#), the national insurance brokerage that acquired what had been McGraw Wentworth in 2012. Headquartered in the Detroit suburb of Troy, MMA Michigan has nearly 100 employees and



more than 220 clients. It's a far cry from the firm McGraw and his partner, Bill Wentworth, founded in 1997 with just three employees. But having joined, run, and sold another benefits firm, he knew what he wanted in this one.



“From the very beginning, the leaders of this firm—starting with my partner and me—recognized that having the right people is everything,” McGraw said. “We recognized that getting high performers—self-responsible, self-disciplined people—would be crucial to our success. That’s been a guiding principle of our firm forever.”

He adds, “Everyone is writing about employee engagement these days, and it certainly makes sense. But even before the concept of employee engagement, we realized that having the employees ‘all in’, committed to both their team and their clients, would be crucial to our ability to differentiate ourselves.”

McGraw said, “If one of our teams is out there dealing with ABC Company, and their experience, their emotional connection, with our employee, our teammate, is different because it’s all in, they feel it. People are smart. They say, ‘You know what? I know I can trust Cathy. I know I can trust Bill. I know I can trust Dan. These guys are all in for me.’ That flows from high-performance, relentlessly disciplined, self-directed, engaged people.

“Engagement shows up in a moment of truth between our employee and a client or prospect when they see they are dealing with somebody who is all in for their team and for their client. They’re willing to expend discretionary effort to make a situation better and to demonstrate—not just in words, but in action—that there is no white space between our employee and our client. People feel that. Our clients feel that. And that experience shows up in our 97 percent client-retention rate.”

Hiring, Firing, and Managing with Commitment

McGraw looks for commitment in employees before their first day. “It all starts with not compromising in the hiring process,” he said. “We never fill a new position or replace a departure by taking a flyer on somebody. We’re rigorous and unrelenting in the

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determination to have responsible, self-directed, self-disciplined people throughout the company.”

McGraw is still involved in every hire. He said, “Now, by the time I meet with them, they’ve probably had three other interviews and they have had the discussion about high performance, working with self-directed and self-disciplined people, having the right people on the bus, and the culture.”

He acknowledges that hiring mistakes happen, saying, “We give it every chance to succeed, but, if it’s just not a fit, we have got to act. We refuse to create workarounds because a hiring manager is afraid or embarrassed to admit a mistake. That serves no purpose whatsoever. We’ve got to be as rigorous about that willingness to make a change as we were about our determination to get the right person here in the first place.”

Management, he said, has to be transparent and honest—even humble—especially in the face of change like the 2012 MMA acquisition. “Things change when you get acquired,” he said. “We had a willingness to confront the realities of the changes that needed to be made following the acquisition.

“At the same time, we’ve got a leadership team that also demonstrates personal humility, a willingness to listen to people, to take the time to say, ‘If you have concerns, please express them,’ to acknowledge the facts and not to sugarcoat them. There’s no sense in trying to make



a myth out of 'Nothing will change,' because people watch what leaders do."

McGraw also credits Marsh & McLennan, saying, "They're sufficiently enlightened

to believe in this thing called employee engagement. They're trying to push it through an organization of 50,000 employees worldwide. And we're in agreement that my job is to get it right with my team and in my physical space here in Troy, Michigan."

The Distinction Between Good and Easy

It's said that sometimes good things look easy, but McGraw cautions that there is a stark difference between a place that's good to work and one where it's easy.

"I go out of my way to talk to our team about that," he said. "Ping-pong tables and sushi lunches don't mean anything compared to the quality of the people that you're rubbing elbows with 40 or 50 hours a week. It's the quality of the team that makes this a great workplace.

"That's not to minimize ping-pong tables or sushi lunches, but we don't have them," he said. "For us, high-performing workplaces have good managers and good leaders who are honest and fair and transparent and supportive, along with people who have the resources they need to succeed, as well as feedback on how they're doing it.

"We want open and candid discussion about career trajectory, leaders keeping the covenant of honesty with people, and the confidence among employees that their teammates are all in like them. That's more important than the cushy perks."

Again, none of this is new, McGraw said; it's merely been refined.

"People are not built differently today than they were 20 years ago, but leadership and management are focusing on engagement to a greater degree and rightfully so," he said. "This is a positive evolution in the skills of leadership and management."