



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Orange County
Program Title: Workplace Culture Initiative
Program Category: Organizational Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephanie Straub
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Signature: Stephanie Straub

2024 VACo Achievement Award Nomination

Category: Organizational Development

Nominee: Workplace Culture Initiative

Executive Summary:

Motivated in part by employee engagement surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021, Orange County made the determination to improve workplace culture and to position ourselves as an employer of choice. Most organizations face challenges with staff retention and engagement. Within the public sector, small to middle-sized rural counties like ours face the challenge of being perceived as good starting points for careers and training. Upon acquiring the necessary skills and experience, it is common for talented employees to leave for a larger locality with higher pay. In response to this challenge, Orange County conducted a classification scale study and adjustment, benefits review and improvement implementation, and an employee-driven effort to promote improvements to our workplace culture.

From this employee-led effort, a three-pronged approach was developed to increase employee engagement, wellness, and enjoyment of their jobs. Most visible is the J.U.I.C.E. program, which recognizes staff members displaying “Joyful, Uplifting, Innovative, Caring, or Empowering” characteristics at work with a small “Orange J.U.I.C.E.”-branded prize. This program culminates in an appreciation event with games, food, and fellowship, the first of which was held July 11, 2022. Fun is fostered with the “County Cup,” which breaks down silos with friendly monthly competitions. Lastly, acknowledging that workplace culture goes beyond the jobsite, we have moved beyond traditional benefits by implementing a comprehensive approach to employee wellness.

Main Nomination:

Following engagement surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021, Orange County made the determination to address concerns and become an employer of choice in our region and beyond. Defining engagement as the culmination of three parts: high motivation, commitment to staying, and willingness to recruit others, the first survey indicated only 52% engagement. Making meaningful change and accomplishing our goals required addressing distinct challenges, of which some are specific to our situation and others are nearly universal to all counties.

Most organizations face challenges with staff retention. In general, counties are less able to provide high salaries and bonuses than the private sector. Even within the public sector, small to middle-sized rural counties like ours face the challenge of being perceived as good starting points for careers and training. Once an employee has developed their skills and experience, they may leave for a larger locality with higher pay.

An additional challenge, rather unique to us, is the layout of Orange County. With population centers at either end of an oblong, almost banana-shaped county, our employees serve our residents from 22 distinct facilities. Being so separated physically can naturally cause the creation of silos. The impact of this geographic separation was multiplied by the pandemic, which often required that minimal interaction take place between departments.

In summary, the Workplace Culture Initiative was created to reduce the impact of this geographic and organizational separation by fostering a revitalized team atmosphere. Ensuring our staff members felt seen and heard across geographic and organizational boundaries helped break down silos and encouraged increased engagement.

Instituting changes at an organizational level often requires fresh eyes. To get the ball rolling, this process began with a series of meetings guided by consultants from Zelos, LLC. This consultant was already contracted for strategic planning assistance, which helped reduce the cost. Each of these meetings invited groups of employees identified as our Senior Leadership Team and Key Leadership Team. Senior leadership can largely be described with the traditional “Department Head” label, but was expanded to include certain staff members who work cross-departmentally with Directors and Managers. Key Leadership was identified by our organization and represents a much broader, more diverse, and very creative concept of leader. It seeks those who are heavily involved and energized to be the force of change in our organization. The meetings were set up to encourage outside-the-box thinking and were staff-driven by representatives at all organizational levels.

At these meetings, staff refined interpersonal skills to foster trust and build insight regarding varying personality types and how best to work as a team. Team-building activities helped begin the process of breaking silos. As a staff-driven process, committees and an Implementation Team spanning our organization were established based on organizational areas of need identified. Focus areas included Employee Growth & Development, Collaboration, Customer Service, Communication, and a Positive Work Environment. Taking the ball and running, our staff subcommittees worked on each of their goals and came together regularly as a more comprehensive Culture Initiative Committee to provide a platform for productive communication about ways to connect disparate departments. Energized by organizational support and focused by consistent meetings, these committees developed achievable and impactful initiatives to promote positive change across the County. Among these many projects, highlights include the

Orange J.U.I.C.E. Employee Recognition Program (with the J.U.I.C.E. Employee Appreciation Event as its cornerstone), the County Cup Competition hosted by Parks & Recreation, the creation of a more holistic Wellness Program for our staff, and an annual service award ceremony.

Realizing that good work is often acknowledged with silence, and that employees far too frequently only hear negative feedback from citizens and coworkers, the “Orange J.U.I.C.E.” Employee Recognition program was developed. Using existing resources in an innovative way, this program allows employees to submit an online form available on the county website at <http://www.orangecountyva.gov/recognition> to give “kudos” to their coworkers when they



Figure 1: The online Orange J.U.I.C.E. Employee Recognition Form, available at <http://www.orangecountyva.gov/recognition>.

witness them performing their duties in a way that exemplifies one (or several) of the



Figure 2: Modest prizes helped provide tangible reminders of the recognition an employee received.

following characteristics: Joyful, Uplifting, Innovative, Caring, and Empowering. Our Human Resources Department receives the recognitions by email, and distributes a copy to the nominated employee, along with a small J.U.I.C.E.-branded prize such as a cup that turns

orange when filled with cold liquid (resembling actual orange juice) or an athletic pennant labelled “Orange County All Star.” They have become points of pride; many staff collect and display their recognitions prominently. Furthermore, being recognized makes the recipient eligible for quarterly drawings for larger (though still modest) prizes, like OC-branded cooler backpacks, to help maintain excitement. Using a digital spinning wheel, drawings are either held live at events or recorded for staff to view. The organizing

committees were amazed at the responses, both quantitatively and qualitatively! As of this nomination, nearly 300 recognitions have been submitted. Simply making this tool available had profound impacts on staff morale. Example submissions help demonstrate exactly how powerful the kind words could be:

- “Cindy knew that I had a task that needed to be completed but I had not had time to do it. She had a little down time one Friday, got the supplies from me, and completed the task. It was a tremendous help! Cindy has such a caring heart and is always willing to lend a hand when it’s needed.”
- “Mr. Davis always goes above and beyond his duties. He is willing to help whenever we need help loading/unloading a car with programing things, keeps the front walk cleared off, and anything we ask of him. You will always be greeted in the morning/afternoon with a smile on his face! We are so grateful to have him as part of our team!”
- “Justin always puts panicked callers at ease on medical calls. This evening a female called with heart problems that slowly got worse as medics responded. He remained on the line with her. He kept conversation going to distract the caller and keep her mind at ease. At the end of the call, the caller thanked him and told him he was good at his job, Everyone needs to hear that from time to time. It makes you remember why we are all here.”

County Cup challenges provided another opportunity for connection, both within a department through teamwork, and across the organization through light-hearted competition. These monthly events provided both a welcome respite from the traditional workday and helped bridge the gap between siloed departments. They were organized to be as accessible as possible, often occurring over several days, around lunchtime. When needed, our Parks & Recreation Department travelled to other facilities, removing obstacles to participation. Recognizing the diversity of skills and abilities among our staff, these challenges were designed to reward a variety of

talents. Some events, such as collecting leaves in a wind tunnel, had a physical focus supplemented with a healthy dose of luck. Others relied on riddle-solving abilities and mathematical prowess. The final event, held in December, was a Jeopardy-style holiday movie and song trivia game.

Throughout the contest, participants were encouraged to work as a team to achieve the best scores for their departments while creating shared experiences that connected staff across buildings and agencies. Stories from every County Cup challenge easily crossed would-be barriers,



Figure 3: Our first County Cup event, held January 2023, was a Simon Challenge.

with our Parks & Recreation Director sharing highlights during each month's announcement of winners. Some favorite anecdotes that circled the organization included our County Administrator performing a stretching ritual only to immediately false start in his first attempt collecting flying fake money in a wind tunnel, our Economic Development Director striking a golf ball so hard in a putting contest that she sent it airborne and left a dent in a door down the hall, and the incredibly tight race that featured several lead changes to determine the final victor in the holiday trivia game. A video was released by Parks & Recreation detailing exactly how close the race truly was. It is available online <https://fb.watch/rc1kplFild/>.

Though tremendously important and successful, the J.U.I.C.E. recognitions and the County Cup take place at the surface level. Aware that culture goes deeper and reflects an employer's willingness to provide support for its personnel, we have made great strides establishing, then expanding, an employee wellness program. This began

with the hire of a Wellness Program Manager within the Human Resources Department, and the adoption of an Employee Assistance Program vendor. With these as a foundation, our staff now have free access to confidential counseling services, training, work/life resources, and much more. Since resources are only as good as awareness of them, the Wellness Program Manager creates and distributes a quarterly “Wellness @ Work” newsletter. This newsletter is sent to all employees highlighting ways to live healthier, be more mindful, and access the many resources that are available to them.

Going a step further, our Wellness program had its inaugural Wellness Expo on January 17, 2024. It included elements of a traditional benefits fair because those are useful and informative. However, this event went way beyond that concept in a truly innovative fashion. Similarly to our J.U.I.C.E. events and the County Cup, this program was scheduled at a time allowing the greatest potential attendance from our employees. Nineteen vendors participated, which was visited by more than 120 employees. To use as an icebreaker and incentive, bingo cards were distributed upon an employee’s arrival. This card could be stamped at each vendor booth attended. Collecting enough stamps made an employee eligible for prize drawings! In addition to dental, health, and other elements of our benefits package, wellness vendors such as local gyms, representatives from our Employee Assistance Program, and even internal resources such as the Orange County Library and Extension Office were on site to explain their services and ways employees could benefit from them. As such, this event continued to aid our goal of breaking silos, connecting staff members, and fostering teamwork.

The J.U.I.C.E. Employee Appreciation Event represents a culmination of all other efforts, and it is much more than the “Thank You Pizza Party” that many picture when they hear employee appreciation. The first event, held July 11, 2022, launched the J.U.I.C.E. Employee Recognition program, and encouraged staff to begin recognizing the meaningful work they noticed among their coworkers. The second event, held August 30, 2023, showcased the culmination and impact



Figure 4: J.U.I.C.E. Event 2023 – This event attracted staff from across the organization! It was scheduled to allow maximum staff availability, and offices were permitted to close for the event.

of a full year of recognitions through live drawings and prizes. For both events the most important component was fellowship. Held at one of our parks, a variety of food trucks were available to provide a choice of lunch to attendees. Games such as cornhole, a giant version of “Connect 4,” and many others provided opportunities for fun and interaction between coworkers who might never meet during their usual workday. Specialty (somewhat collectable) t-shirts were provided to staff at each event. They are often worn on Fridays, and the designs help reinforce the goals of the Workplace Culture initiative. The 2023 event also incorporated a County Cup contest: dart-throwing. Thanks to the large attendance at the event, this contest enjoyed amazing participation, with 125 competitors (over 30% of the organization)!

Each event was well-attended; in fact, the 2023 event welcomed 175 employees, approaching 50% of the organization! With so many staff onsite, the J.U.I.C.E. events provided an avenue for meaningful interaction between employees, leadership, and the

organization as a whole. Administrators were onsite to talk freely with staff. At the most recent event, Members of our Workplace Culture Initiative Implementation Team seized the opportunity to solicit honest feedback in the form of a Culture Survey. While available for a two-week period electronically, the event provided an opportunity to promote the survey and allow for those without email access to (still anonymously) participate. Energized by the positive survey responses, we are still working to continuously improve.



Figure 5: J.U.I.C.E. Event 2023 – The County Cup, another Culture Initiative element, held aloft by our Parks & Rec. Director Tim Moubray while supported by County Administrator Ted Voorhees and Supervisor Lee Frame. Darts was held as a County Cup challenge during the JUICE event, with a record number of participants.

Our Workplace Culture Initiative has demonstrated that employees can be the change they wish to see in an organization. By empowering staff members at all levels to contribute their ideas and then become champions of cultural improvement based on those ideas, this program has moved the needle of employee engagement and helped position Orange County as an employer of choice.

The multi-pronged approach to improving employee engagement has broken down silos and met staff members in a way that resonates with them. For some, recognition of their efforts by coworkers has improved their morale. For others, friendly competition has inspired renewed team spirit within a department and fostered new connections across the organization. For all employees, fellowship events are a reminder of our shared mission. They provide a dedicated time to celebrate, connect, and refocus. We are extremely proud of the progress made so far, and look forward to building on that success.