



Mark A. Parrish blends military-style leadership principles with servant leadership practices in leading cultural transformation at Igloo.



Building a Commitment-Worthy Culture

BY TONY BINGHAM
AND PAT GALAGAN

Igloo Products Corporation turned 70 in March. Its iconic red and white cooler, the Playmate, debuted in 1972 and is still a popular way to keep food and drinks cold without refrigeration. Igloo now designs and makes more than 550 products for hot and cold storage without electricity, and for both personal and commercial hydration. They're sold in more than 70 countries.

Mark A. Parrish joined Igloo in 2015, bringing leadership skills honed at Harley-Davidson and the Simmons Bedding Companies.

His leadership approach is not what you might expect from a former U.S. Army captain and Top Gun pilot who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

We interviewed Parrish at the Igloo factory in Katy, Texas. He began our conversation by reciting the Igloo manifesto, a declaration of intent to support people's pursuit of happiness.

Happiness?

We're not responsible for ensuring your happiness, but we sure as heck can enable you to pursue some. Our products help people get out into the world and to have a good time. We've learned that by talking directly with our consumers around the world about how they use our products. Igloo consumers are dreamers, meaning they're defined by their aspirations.

Having worked at Harley-Davidson and Simmons, I came here with a functional bent toward mass customization in a manufacturing environment. That's what both those companies do.

So, while trying to determine with our consumers what Igloo stood for as a brand, it became clear that there was another story unfolding.

And what is that story?

It's like the TED Talk by Derek Sivers called "How to Start a Movement." It shows a bunch of kids at an outdoor concert. One young man starts dancing by himself. Sivers describes him as "one lonely nut." But then a second guy joins him, and the first guy engages him in the dance. Then comes a third, and then a fourth person, and eventually everyone is hurrying to join what has now become the in-crowd.

The lesson, according to Sivers, is that the leader is not the most important person in starting a movement. To do that, you need that first courageous follower who will show others how to follow.

When I showed up at Igloo, I was kind of the lonely nut, talking about consumer-branded products, knowing the brand's identity, and then creating demand for it. Before long, people were getting on board with the idea, and that became part of a multifaceted and multiyear strategy that began to unify us and give us a common language.


However, strategy is absolutely worthless if not built upon a culture committed to

excellence in its execution. So, together, Igloo's strategy and the culture committed to its execution became known as Operation Rejuvenation—the rejuvenation of the then-68-year-young company.

How do you see your role in Operation Rejuvenation?

I first learned from Rich Teerlink, the former CEO of Harley-Davidson, of the business planning process umbrella. It's an annual cycle with three parts akin to an umbrella's canopy, stem, and hand grip. Within the canopy rests the values connecting, and the vision directing, our associates. The hand grip represents individual performance plans that align people with their departmental tactics in support of the strategic objectives, both of which are represented on the stem of the umbrella.

At the top of the stem, the executive leadership team created a mission with a three- to five-year planning horizon. They determined the supporting strategies with measurable objectives that are revisited every year and projected into the future.



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Management is responsible for the execution of the strategic plan through annual tactical and department action plans. Every 90 days, leadership revisits these plans to ask whether they've got the time, manpower, and money to succeed.

My responsibility is to paint an inspiring vision while daily capturing, codifying, communicating, and role-modeling our shared values.

[How does the talent development function contribute to the success of Operation Rejuvenation?](#)

Every company is made up of people, processes, and technologies. Technologies can be purchased. Processes can be replicated. But the one truly sustainable competitive advantage is the contribution of the people you employ. Therefore, the role of talent must be emphasized.

[How do you know that talent development efforts are working?](#)

We measure our collective success in four areas, and in this order: people, quality, service, and cost. We make both human capital and financial capital decisions based on that hierarchy.

We also measure employee engagement. Data from our 2016 survey show that 93 percent of our associates report that they do their best every day and are happy to take on new tasks.

In addition, we measure the number of complaints from associates. Complaints allow us to demonstrate that we listen, learn, and act, and that we care. People don't always care what you know, but they want to know that you care.

[You've led successful transformations at other companies. What insights can you share about how to make a transformation successful?](#)

In 2000, I was working at MW Windows in Rocky Mount, Virginia. Our private-equity sponsor also held Simmons Mattress as a sister company in the portfolio. The CEO of Simmons asked me to articulate the principles we were using to build a culture of commitment at MW. That became a collection of 12 Disciplines for Building Cultures of Commitment.

I spent 10 years in the military, where I learned a lot about discipline. But my first exposure to a definition of discipline in the civilian sector was in the book *The Servant Leader* by James C. Hunter. He defines discipline as the practice of that which comes unnaturally. It takes no discipline to sleep in until you feel like getting up. But it's unnatural to get up at 4:30 a.m. and go to the gym. That takes discipline.

Building cultures is a constant and continuous investment. They're either coming together or coming apart, but it's never a stagnant relationship between company and employee. So having disciplines by which you build commitment to excellence in execution is my answer to your question.

The first of the 12 disciplines is the gift of trust. The second is the suspension of judgment. The third is entering into dialogue. The fourth is empowerment defined as freedom with fences. The fifth is about the abandonment of principles for position—or politics. There we talk about how to inoculate a culture committed to collective success against the cancer of politics.

Those five disciplines are about how we deal with each other. The other seven are about doing specific things, such as communicating and holding after-action reviews.

Culture-building is an art, but there is a science behind it, and that's what the disciplines are about. [See article on page 36 by Igloo Chief HR Officer Jeanette Winters about the 12 disciplines practiced at Igloo.]

[What about boards and investors who are looking at a transformation as a way to increase shareholder value?](#)

Building shareholder value is certainly the goal of a transformation. You do that by creating a company that's actually worthy of every associate's 100 percent commitment.

I've been part of organizations where everyone felt committed to a larger purpose. I've seen people's commitment make them do the most heroic things. I want to re-create that here at Igloo. The business goal of building shareholder value need not conflict with the noble goal of making a difference for all of our associates. That's the key.

I learned about the difference between noble goals and business goals from Professor Shoji Shiba at MIT. He used to say that the goal of a business is to make money, but that its success depends on having a noble goal.

I think of companies as falling between the poles of compliance and commitment. In cultures of compliance, there are policies and procedures. People are afraid of being caught doing something wrong, so they find out where the seat of power is and make sure they're close to it. That's politics. It's the abandonment of principle for position.

Cultures of commitment have policies and procedures, too, but in those cultures people will be judged on the values they demonstrate rather than how compliant they are with policies and procedures. I assure you that a culture of commitment will outperform a culture of compliance any day.

[The Igloo management hierarchy is depicted as an upside-down triangle with the CEO at the bottom. Some people might find this surprising in a CEO with a military background. How did that come about?](#)

After leaving the military and going to MIT to study engineering, plus leadership and management, I applied for a job at Harley-Davidson, and I got a letter of rejection. Not wanting to take no for an answer, I called up and asked why; why not me?

That phone call led to an interview and eventually to a job at Harley-Davidson. But the tough conversations in that interview were the basis of my ideas about combining two kinds of culture.

My military experience seemed to me to be directly pertinent to a leadership role in a company. For 10 years I had learned the concept of a code of conduct and a set of principles upon which decisions would be made and behaviors would be judged. I had enjoyed the ideal of a higher calling and purpose. I had learned leadership principles in a living laboratory. I had to make the case that these lessons would be of value to a business.

But I had also studied leadership and management in the civilian sector, and my goal

was to apply to an organization owned by shareholders the leadership disciplines of the military with the operations and financial engineering disciplines demanded in commerce.

Building a culture where the CEO is on the bottom is certainly not a stereotypical military-style, command-and-control approach to leadership. Turn the support structure upside down and it becomes servant leadership.

Building a culture worthy of every single associate's 100 percent commitment starts with me supporting the people who report to me, and they support the people who report to them, and so on, up to our associates who deliver an experience to our cherished customer.

[What's the role of your chief human resources officer, Jeanette Winters, in this structure?](#)

The chief human resources officer is the keeper of the culture. Jeanette is my right hand and part of the executive team.

Jeanette is instrumental in our efforts to be a living laboratory for employment norms in light manufacturing in areas such as diversity, wages, and training.

The average wage for our operations team is 41 percent over minimum wage here in Texas. And they enjoy tier-one benefits—the best you'll find in our industry. We articulate those benefits early in the employment process. They're spelled out in a handbook called *The Associate's Guide to Success*. The handbook, which is available in Spanish and English, also spells out the 12 disciplines for success.

We commit to training each employee anywhere between 15 and 40 hours annually, depending on their role. Some of that is in the classroom and some is experiential learning on the job. Our recipe is to train, coach, and counsel—in that order. And if those are not successful, if someone is still struggling, then there is accountability, meaning the person will be reassigned or leave. Accountability is never about punishing someone who's failed or struggled. It's a process of treating everyone with dignity, even those departing.

We're finding ways to be productive and financially successful while ensuring that our

employees are paid a living wage and receive training not only for what they're doing today, but what they'll be doing in the future.

Your first day at Igloo was only a week after the company announced the acquisition of Cool Gear International as part of a plan to manufacture food storage and personal hydration products. How did that play into your plans to create a culture of success at Igloo?

When one company acquires another, there's often the question of which culture is going to win. The answer is neither, for there's always a new one.

Step one is capital consolidation. That's easy—but it requires colossal collaboration to get from there to integration. It's so hard to do

that acquisitions fail to achieve their full investment thesis more than 90 percent of the time.

So, what I've learned is that the point of the colossal collaboration required to get to integration is to make sure that the resulting hybrid culture reflects the best of both.

Most companies don't last 70 years. As Igloo's CEO, I'm humbled by the opportunity to lead our enterprise and its dedicated associates into Igloo's eighth decade of enabling the pursuit of happiness. As we like to say here in Katy town, "Let's get out there. Let's make the most of it. Let's live the dream."

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