

Let's Be Clear

Care.com's CEO sets the example for nurturing and respect in company interactions. The result: happy employees and clients.

by CHARLENE OLDHAM

In communicating with consumers and employees of Care.com, CEO Sheila Lirio Marcelo practices transparency—literally and figuratively. “The whole office is surrounded in glass,” she says. “And my office is very visible to everybody in the company: what I work on, who I’m meeting with, what I’m doing. To me the symbolism of transparency is really important, and I was proactive in designing the office that way.”

The nurturing of employees as well as clients is a key to the success of Waltham, Mass.-based Care.com, which Marcelo launched with seven employees in 2006. The online service matches families with people who help them take care of nearly everything, from their children and aging parents to laundry when they are away from home.

Today, Care.com hosts more than 1 million registered care providers and averages 6 million website visits each month. Care.com recently acquired Besser Betreut GmbH, the largest online destination for care and service providers in Europe, and the company expanded its services to the United Kingdom and Canada. Payroll is more than 150 and growing. Although the privately held company does not disclose revenue, it recently closed a deal for \$50 million in venture capital.

That growth has forced Marcelo to communicate creatively with her staff. In addition to regularly implementing surveys and holding companywide meetings that put issues in the open, the busy mother of two boys reaches out to individual employees through email, text, Skype or over a breakfast or lunch outside her transparent walls. “Sometimes I have lunch with people on the weekend, if it’s a sensitive topic. It’s about communicating in whatever medium works best for people.”

That doesn’t mean she expects employees to be available 24/7. Rather, Marcelo views technology as a tool to help her staff find the balance that works best for them. For some employees, that might mean seeing their child’s soccer game on Thursday afternoon and using remote-access computer equipment to catch up on a project during the weekend. Others might need to answer office calls after dinner dishes.

“I try to be respectful of their personal time. I don’t assume that just because I’m the CEO, it’s all about my schedule. I think it’s really important to send that signal that it’s about respecting each other.”



One way Marcelo builds respect among all Care.com employees is through forums in which workers hear directly from colleagues (rather than from managers or human resources) about their challenges and solutions. Marcelo finds these forums are the best way to build staff trust and reinforce that everyone works hard to help each other and the company succeed, whether that means logging 40 hours in the office or responding to emails at night after a late-afternoon doctor’s appointment.

“It’s a good way for employees to hear from each other,” she says. It fosters mutual respect and understanding because “one person’s definition of flexibility isn’t necessarily another person’s. So when it comes to the workplace and someone is leaving at 4 p.m., there is no judgment of that.”



Sheila Lirio Marcelo, CEO of Care.com, communicates by whatever means and at whatever times work best for the other person.

instance) and religious organizations often can help—and she also says to call Care.com for suggestions.

It costs a company nothing to offer employees the flexibility to deal with a crisis, Marcelo says, and it's a benefit people cherish. Marcelo knows this from her own struggles. When still in college, Marcelo gave birth to her first son. A few years later, her parents emigrated to the United States from the Philippines and were helping with baby-sitting when her father suffered a heart attack, suddenly becoming the one who needed care.

Marcelo's painful experience made her realize how many other families might need help with similar crises. "I knew I wanted to build something different," she says of the idea behind Care.com. "What we do as a service really has to tie to our values. It's about making sure that we live up to the name of Care.com, and I think that's always something we are reminding each other about."

Marcelo isn't exempt from these reminders. She recounts one forum in which a staff member complained that office meetings never started on time. Marcelo responded by saying she would make it a personal priority to begin on schedule.

"I think there are a lot of ways to walk the talk around that kind of openness and approachability," she says of accepting and responding to feedback. "That sends a signal that, if I'm taking the accountability and I'm humble about the feedback, then it creates an environment where other people take a similar approach."

A peek at the company website or its Facebook page makes it clear that Care.com welcomes dialogue with both employees and clients. Marcelo's blog, for instance, recounts mother-in-law anecdotes overheard in Care.com's office kitchen; the site also features employee bios that emphasize staff members' experience as caregivers to kids, parents and grandparents over any executive titles and alma maters. More exchanges are on the company Facebook page, which might feature a staff-to-consumer conversation regarding background checks. Marcelo believes Care.com's focus on individuality and its open communication with consumers and employees helped it earn a spot on the *Boston Business Journal's* latest Best Places to Work list.

How open is it? Marcelo even encourages employees to initiate one-on-one meetings with supervisors to discuss goals, performance—anything, really. While this might seem a labor-intensive management model to those accustomed to more traditional performance reviews, Marcelo sees regular communication as the key to avoiding a "high-maintenance situation" down the road.

"So I don't see it as being labor-intensive," she says. "The most valuable capital in the company are the people. So you've got to make time for them." **S**

Care.com's nonjudgmental atmosphere means others are quick to help when a colleague seems overworked, burned-out or stressed, as was the case when one Care.com staff member unexpectedly traveled to Israel to care for ailing parents, Marcelo says. Many Care.com employees, like company clients, must care for aging parents and young families at the same time. Co-workers often offer colleagues the support that clients need.

"We let people know they should ask for help, or we offer help. What's also been valuable is we've got terrific social workers on staff, and they also help employees who might be struggling," Marcelo says. "It's a nice feeling to know that you are in a company that provides those services to the broader population."

What about businesses not fortunate enough to have social workers on staff? "There are many [places] employees can call and get advice, especially when it comes to senior care," Marcelo says. Charitable groups (the Alzheimer's Association, for instance), government services (community centers and senior centers, for



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