

LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

Papa John's exec on people focus: 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'



Marvin Boakye was recently appointed as Papa John's new chief people officer.

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Marvin Boakye says he believes companies are either growing and evolving or they're dying.

And that's the reason he took the job as the first chief people officer of Papa John's International Inc. (Nasdaq: PZZA).

Boakye, a 20-year human resources veteran, has been in the new role for only three weeks. But he's happy to see the leadership team at Papa John's already is working to shift its culture and come a more people-focused company – that's Boakye's bread and butter.

In previous leadership positions at The Home Depot, Marathon Petroleum and Goodyear, he has driven major culture changes.

"My experience has come in the way of helping build change and build great cultures in organizations," he said. "They're all in that place of trying to define themselves through their culture and their people."

Similarly, Louisville-based Papa John's has made a commitment to changing its internal culture and its external perception.

It has been making leadership changes in recent months, following a tumultuous summer of scandals prompted by a Forbes article that called the company's culture into question and caused strife between ousted founder John Schnatter and the company's senior leadership.

Along with the new leadership, the company has adopted several new diversity and inclusion programs. And just this week, it announced a tuition benefit program, which will allow many of its employees to earn higher education degrees paid for by the company. (See more about the program [here](#).)

Boakye answered these questions about what he thinks is

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in store for the company's future:

Coming into this role, what will your focus be and what impact do you hope to have?

When I came on board here, it was with a clear view that we're in the midst of a transformation. We want to become a better place for our 120,000 team members.

So as the company's first chief people officer, I'll be heading up our company's talent management strategy, people and operations, compensation and benefits, and learning development. In my role, I'm continually thinking about ways to attract, motivate, retain and help our people perform.

Papa John's has committed, internally and externally, to changing its culture. How far along would you say the company is in that process?

Great cultures are always evolving. Companies that think the journey has ended are absolutely missing the point. For Papa John's, it will be a long-term journey. We're focusing on doing more around diversity and inclusion and providing career growth opportunities to our employees.

Our leadership team is spending a lot of time on this. I can guarantee that you'll be seeing more coming from us soon.

What about this job and company caught your interest?

There were probably three things:

No. 1, you've got to love the product or service that you're getting involved with. I'm very fortunate that this was my favorite pizza and my family's favorite pizza. I'm like a kid in a candy store.

Second is the culture. I want to be part of an organization that's truly wanting to create a great, extraordinary culture. One that people wake up with a purpose – this is what they love to do. It's challenging, it's innovative and it's creating something special.

And third is the leadership. I think we've got a great team of motivated and energized leaders who believe what they're doing is something special.

Based on where we are in the organization, coming here today was the right choice because I can add value. It's no surprise there's been a ton of press about us. You've got to be the type of person who can separate what's happening now, but also be able to create a company that can see beyond that and focus on what we do best, which is making better pizza.

What has been your impression of Papa John's since you arrived?

My impression has been consistent with the three things I mentioned before. People here have a passion for what they do. People are learning and relearning constantly. They're a group that's comfortable with saying, 'let's shift over to something else' when something isn't working.

You're seeing some of that passion to differentiate. One example is our recent launch of the partnership with Purdue Global – being able to offer tuition-free education – we believe that's a first in our industry.

[The company wants] to create a great culture through diversity, equity and inclusion. Currently, all of our corporate employees have done a minimum of six hours of training in this area, which has really opened up conversations about who we are and who we want to be.

As a company, we're willing to take those conversations on to build a great brand both internally and externally.

How did the idea for this education program with Purdue Global come about?

This program has been in the works since last year, as we started to think about things that would differentiate us in the market.

We're in a business that has relatively high turnover, so we looked at this as a way to commit to the career of our people. A lot of people in our leadership roles today started at the hourly level.

Second, programs like this, we believe, are going to help drive retention. We're offering a great solution for people to get a job and meaningful employment, and a tuition-free education. It puts them in a path to further success in their lives.

What experience do you have enacting these types programs?

My experience has come in the way of helping build change and build great cultures in organizations. I have had the opportunity to be part of some great groups at The Home Depot, Goodyear, Andeavor, which is now Marathon. They're all in that place of trying to define themselves through their culture and their people.

There's an old adage that culture eats strategy for breakfast. We want to be a company that's not just known for what we achieve but also how we do it. And that's what I bring to the table, and that's been my experience.