

In a year in which the banking industry has faced its fair share of economic challenges, Houston-based Amegy Bank is having its best year ever. With \$11 billion in assets and compounded annual growth rates approaching 20 percent, the Texas financial leader has achieved long-term success.

While other banks chased dazzling, high-risk returns, such as subprime mortgages, Amegy pursued a different management strategy – continuing its lasting investment in its personnel.

Bankers with a face, customers with a name

Founded in 1990 as Southwest Bank of Texas by Walter Johnson, Amegy surfaced in the aftermath of a burst Houston economy. To become a responsive business community bank with a twist, Amegy pursued a growth philosophy of “one relationship at a time, one account at a time.”

In order to develop loyalty, all Amegy employees were asked to take a formal pledge of extraordinary customer service. The promise made by Amegy’s first employees – 20 people working from a single Houston location – is still honored today, seven mergers and acquisitions later, by nearly 2,000 employees in 85 branches in Houston, Dallas and San Antonio.

To make good on their customer service pledge, Amegy employees work across time zones to meet their customers’ needs. Whether it is to wire urgent funds to a shipping customer in the Ukraine, pay an on-site visit to a local restaurateur seeking expansion capital, or even find a canine companion for a widowed customer, Amegy surrounds customers with service.

The business of listening

At the foundation of Amegy’s customer service philosophy is treating your internal customers, or fellow employees, as you treat your external customers – with respect.

Quite often respect takes the form of listening, explains Alicia Blaszk, senior vice president and human resources director. “Everyone counts. Most employee issues arise from a miscommunication, or an employee’s sense that his or her complaint is not being heard.”

Diverse challenges

A prevention perspective is key to avoiding the drain to employee morale and financial resources that litigation can bring, says Blaszk. But should early signs of trouble appear, she advocates securing the advice of a trusted legal advisor, someone who understands your organization and its legal and business objectives.

For Amegy, that means turning to Cristina Portela Solomon, a senior shareholder in Winstead’s labor and employment practice group. During her 10-year partnership with Amegy, Solomon has helped them manage their most valuable asset – employees – by promoting solid workplace policies, procedures and internal resolution of employee issues, when they arise.

One example of Amegy’s proactive approach occurred in 2002 when HR Manager Fran Blair requested that Solomon provide formal diversity training to all of Amegy’s executives, supervisors and employees. Solomon was joined by Winstead Shareholder Stephen W. Schueler and the team presented the training to every employee of Amegy – from teller to top executive.



From left to right: Charlene Jones, Teresa McLeod, and Alicia Blaszk, Amegy; Cristina Portela Solomon, Winstead PC; Fran Blair, Amegy

Amegy Bank

The training program, filled with real-life case studies, embodied Amegy’s commitment to communication, respect, and common-sense solutions to labor and employment issues.

When another potential problem emerged, in the form of a staff reduction of 280 employees necessitated by Amegy’s 2005 merger with Zions Bancorporation, General Counsel Allan Port sought Solomon’s practical guidance. Once again, through careful planning, Amegy avoided the claims and litigation that frequently accompany sizeable layoffs.

“Winstead understands our mission of being a great place to work. Their guidance through the years has adapted as we’ve grown from a small bank to where we are today,” observes Amegy Bank CEO Paul Murphy.

“A” bank ahead

With its expanding footprint across the state, Amegy employees are increasingly multigenerational, virtual and geographically dispersed. Challenges to preserving its close-knit culture of open communication are inevitable.

But Winstead’s Solomon predicts, “Amegy’s commitment to do right by their employees motivates them to find creative solutions to their labor and employment issues, and view the courthouse as a last resort. Their focus is not on ‘who is right?’ but instead on ‘how do we solve the problem and maintain strong and positive employee relations?’”

In turn, Amegy considers Solomon a strategic ally. Says Blair, “Cristina is there for us. Not just through e-mails, but face-to-face, visiting a local branch or quickly responding to last-minute questions, in her

easily-understood and non-typical lawyer way. We know she cares about us.”

And customer care is what Amegy clearly values. ■

THE CHALLENGE

Recruit and retain a professional and customer-focused, diverse workforce to serve an ever expanding, diverse banking clientele

THE SOLUTION

- Minimize employment claims through consistent and fair enforcement of employment policies
- Act promptly when issues arise and seek internal resolutions
- Listen to, respect and engage employees