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People-First Culture Powers The Wooden Floor

By Nancy Luna
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The Wooden Floor full-time and seasonal staff on Employee Appreciation Day

When Dawn Reese describes her leadership style at The Wooden Floor, she calls herself a servant leader. “I always lead with people first,” she said.

That mindset has driven Reese, who joined the Santa Ana nonprofit in 2009, to roll out a suite of employee-centered perks that go well beyond standard corporate benefits. From extra summer days off to mentorship programs and wellness-focused initiatives, Reese has made culture a priority.

Founded in 1983 by Beth Burns as Saint Joseph Ballet in downtown Santa Ana, The Wooden Floor has evolved over the decades. As the student population grew, the organization has expanded beyond its dance program to offer tutoring, college prep, counseling and crisis intervention to help youth achieve long-term success.

Today, the organization serves 475 students year-round, with additional community engagement programs reaching hundreds more across Orange County.

Now, for the third consecutive year, the nonprofit has been named one of the Business Journal’s Best Places to Work in the small business category (see full list, page 42).

The rankings are based on an employer questionnaire that details policies, practices and benefits, as well as an employee engagement and satisfaction survey about culture, training, pay and benefits. The survey was conducted for the Business Journal by Houston-based Workforce Research Group.

“It’s an honor to be part of it again,” Reese told the Business Journal.

Employee Retention Rates Reach Nearly 100%

The nonprofit boasts a 90–95% retention rate among its 17 full-time employees—up from just 48% in 2009, when Reese first joined as general manager and chief financial officer. Before that, she spent nearly five years as managing director of Opera Pacific.

She said many of the organization’s senior leaders have been with The Wooden Floor for a decade or longer.

She attributes the nonprofit’s high retention rates to its “people first” culture.

One of its standout perks is “Rest and Recharge” days, introduced three years ago for all full-time staff. The initiative grants two additional days off during the summer, encouraging employees to unplug and reset before the next program session begins in the fall.

“We really don’t stop all year round,” she said.

Reese said everyone takes the same days off — bonus time that’s separate from vacation time. The goal is for employees to prioritize family time, relaxation or self-care.

“We encourage people to do something for themselves,” she said, suggesting activities like getting a massage or visiting an amusement park.

Culture Task Force Brings Employees Together

In 2016, The Wooden Floor established a Culture Sustainability Task Force to protect and nurture the organization’s values as it expanded to a second campus. Even though the new location is a mile away, Reese said she wanted to make sure “that our culture didn’t fray.”

The task force spearheads wellness-driven initiatives and staff engagement practices to ensure people from different departments get to know each other.

This year, she said the focus is “wellness in all the domains.”

Some of the task force sessions include sound baths or bringing in guest speakers focused on physical, financial and mental health.

Reese said she likes the sessions “because it brings multiple people’s interests” together to discuss things that they enjoy while learning from others.

“It’s taking care of each other.”