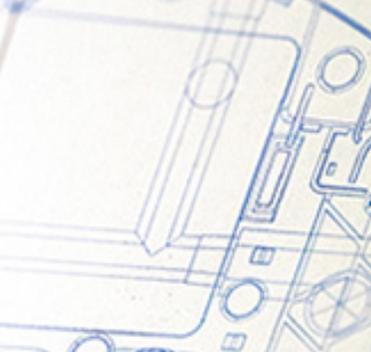


PRO-DEX



Turnaround at Pro-Dex Fueled by Communication and Collaboration

California Manufacturer Promoted from Within and Listened – in Person – to the People Who Matter



When you design and manufacture highly specialized devices and components for the likes of Medtronic and other major medical device companies, you know a thing or two about precision. In Southern California, at [Pro-Dex, Inc.](#), precision in internal communications comes from interacting in person. It's the key to a management approach focused on sharing, listening, and implementing ideas. It's also what has helped Pro-Dex create the employee engagement needed to shift what was, not long ago, a money-loser into a turnaround story—and an [Orange County Register Top Workplaces winner](#).

The slogan “Accelerating Possibilities” sits right under the Pro-Dex name on the company's 30,000-square foot headquarters facility in Irvine, Calif. There, about 70 people work to design and produce surgical and dental instruments used in medicine, factory automation, and scientific research. In addition, the company produces motion controllers and plastic injection molds. Pro-Dex products can be found in hospitals, dental offices, medical engineering labs, and high-tech manufacturing operations around the world.



The company is led by CEO [Rick Van Kirk](#), who was vice president of manufacturing and then chief operating officer before becoming chief executive officer in January 2015. In announcing the appointment, which came after three years of financial losses, the company's chairman said, "The Board has confidence that Rick's leadership style will drive growth and profitability at Pro-Dex." For a veteran manager of manufacturing operations like Van Kirk, effectiveness means not just an open door, but time on the floor.

+39%

"I feel well-informed about decisions at this company."

Pro-Dex scored well above its competitors in the Manufacturing: Medical Devices & Products benchmark in Communication Down survey statement.

Source: 2016 [Workplace Survey](#)

"We've got people who've been with the company a long time, and they do what they do at their station or their desk every day. They have a better idea of how it works than anyone else. We'd be crazy not to listen to them," Van Kirk said. "We have a lot of working managers who are very visible around the building. And there is a lot of in-person communication here. It's part of our culture."

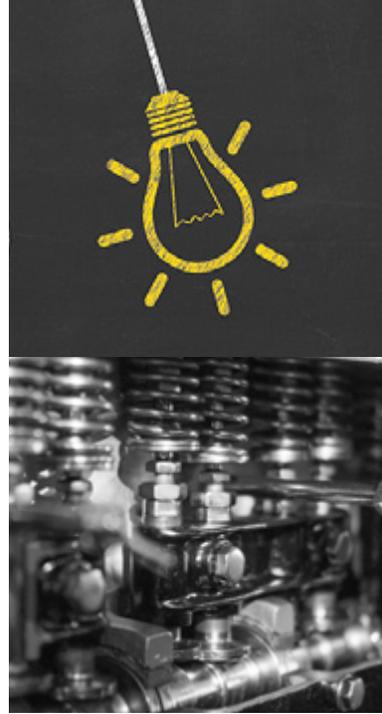
Even the Pro-Dex building was designed to encourage personal collaboration. Van Kirk stated, "A lot of our people don't have a terminal they sit at all day with their own individual email address. Email takes longer anyway because you have to wait for a reply. And often you don't know if the tone will be taken the right way. So, why send an email? You're 10 steps away. Just go over and talk about it. Things get resolved a lot more quickly and directly, and relationships develop better."

Employees gather to hear from Van Kirk before each release of the quarterly financial results in addition to monthly birthday celebration gatherings. He turned what had been informal get-togethers into a valued exchange.

“It used to be a birthday celebration for everyone whose birthday was in that given month,” Van Kirk said. “Now we use it as an opportunity to update everybody as to what’s going on, keep them apprised of new developments and opportunities, and give them a chance to ask questions. So, they’re hearing from me publicly 12 times a year.”

Van Kirk continued, “We find that the more we communicate with the whole company – about results, how we got those results, what we’re trying to do next, and how – the more people feel involved and engaged. Besides, I don’t think it’s fair to ask people to put in long hours or work overtime if we don’t do something in return to help them understand why we’re asking them to do those things.”

All that communication is part of an overall practice Van Kirk calls “Share, Listen, and Implement”. “After ideas are implemented,” he expressed, “it’s especially important to also explain why some suggestions were not put into place so that people know their input was considered. The result of this approach is a work environment that’s a lot more fun, and it seems like, a lot more productive.”



+24%

“Senior managers understand what is really happening at this company.”

Pro-Dex scored well above its competitors in the Manufacturing: Medical Devices & Products benchmark in Communication Up survey statement.

Source: 2016 [Workplace Survey](#)

Employee Engagement in a Turnaround

Sometimes companies get into places that are less than fun...and Pro-Dex is no exception.



“We went through a down stretch there where we didn’t do raises or bonuses for about five years,” Van Kirk said. “We just worked our way through a turnaround coincidental to our being named a Top Workplace. And while that’s a great honor, what’s really nice to see is that success for the people who hung with us. They stuck it out without raises, made suggestions, and doubled up on duties to help save money.

“I just consider myself and the company very fortunate to have a core of very loyal and committed employees who stuck around through some tough times here,” he stated. “It’s really nice to see things go well for people like that. That’s the highlight of all this for me.”

Why did they stay? Van Kirk said reasons include the opportunity for development and an improvement in the corporate culture. “You can build real company loyalty when people feel like they have been taken care of, encouraged, and given an opportunity to grow with the company,” he said. “Two-thirds of the management team has been promoted into the roles we have now.”

Continuing, Van Kirk mentioned, “When you can develop from within and promote from within, that helps you maintain the culture you want, because you’re not bringing in someone from the outside who might not be just the right fit for the way you want to do things.”

Van Kirk explained that when things changed, some people no longer fit in and they knew it. He said, “After a while, as we built momentum, a few people really stuck out like a sore thumb, and they don’t work here anymore. And in most cases, to their credit, they figured it out on their own that they didn’t fit in, and they went and found something else.”

Looking Forward

As the company's financial health continues to improve, Van Kirk would like to take employee engagement outward.

"I'd like to spend more time on community involvement and charitable work," he said. "We'd do it not just as a company, but through groups of people going out and getting involved in events and volunteering.

"Maybe it wouldn't involve everybody, but the people who are involved would have the chance for some additional bonding. It would also help us bond more with the community."

