

# At Dallas accounting firm, bonuses mean more than money

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Kristi Francis is about to give her employees a bonus they can't keep. The 51-year-old owner of a small Dallas accounting firm, Francis & Associates LLC, believes in paying it forward. So she's giving her four employees an extra 1 percent of their annual salaries to pass on to their favorite charities.



BRENDAN SULLIVAN/DMN

**Kristi Francis** (center) believes in keeping her employees - Lisa O'Bryant (from left), Sandy Kleweis, Kathleen Ekstrom and Karen Jostes - happy. 'I find that if I keep my employees happy, I have happy clients,' she said.

"There is something about the feeling of having money and giving it away that empowers people," Francis says in her offices on LBJ Freeway. "I want my employees to feel that joy."

Her total outlay for the gifts that keep on giving will be about \$5,000.

In a world of high finance, this might sound like small potatoes. But it can have singular impact, especially when it comes to making employees feel good. And because it doesn't cost a lot, any company can do it. That's why I like it.

This is the second year that Francis has spread the good will.

Last year, senior tax manager Lisa O'Bryant used her 1 percent charity bonus to underwrite a fundraiser for breast cancer research in support of a friend battling the disease.

"I've got two kids in private school and college, and I've never had the ability to give that kind of money away," the 45-year-old CPA says. "It's a really neat feeling for me."

Francis started her tax practice with one client in 1987 after working for Ernst & Young in Dallas and Cleveland. Her firm has more than 600 clients but is still small, with revenue under \$2 million. So there's a lot of one-on-one work with clients.

"To make a business successful, you first concentrate on what your clients need," she says. "What my clients need are good, personable, brilliant people working on their accounts. I find that if I keep my employees happy, I have happy clients."

**Shopping sprees**

Francis peppers the year with little extras to spice up what can be a dry business for her three CPAs and an executive assistant.

At year-end, employees will get a 5 percent bonus in cash. Two months ago, she kicked in a profit-sharing contribution to their 401(k) accounts that's worth 5 percent of their annual salary.

Technically trained accountants who can build a rapport with clients are worth their weight in gold – or at least a paid trip to the shopping mall twice a year.

After each big tax season, Francis and her staff head to a mall (in October they went to Stonebriar in Frisco) armed with \$500 each in company booty. They scatter and power-shop for two hours.

They have to spend it all on themselves. Gifts for others are strictly forbidden, and practical purchases are apt to draw jeers when they regroup over lunch for a show-and-tell.

O'Bryant says it feels great to give money away, but the shopping spree is still her favorite perk.

"I never have time to shop for myself, and I'm real conservative," she says. "I usually carry around a \$20 handbag for two years. I've never spent a lot of money on a purse, and the last couple of times, I have. It's fun when it's not your money. It's Kristi's money."

Whatever isn't spent in the two hours is supposed to be forfeited. In eight years, only one employee has failed the challenge. She ran out of time and returned \$52. "I slipped it back to her," Francis says.

And Francis gets \$500, too, so she can join in the fun.

During the October outing, Francis overheard one store clerk telling a co-worker about a customer whose "wonderful boss" had given her money to spend just on herself.

"Honestly, I get more mileage out of this little happy perk than anything else we do," Francis says. "Yet it's a very small piece of their compensation."

### **Life balance**

This summer, the company gave each employee \$1,000 for a weekend getaway. Kathleen Ekstrom, 43, took her family to Kansas City for a family reunion. "We all flew, stayed in a wonderful hotel and had a great time. We wouldn't have been able to do it without it."

But none of these perks is about money, Francis contends. People want to feel appreciated, be supported and have flexibility to enjoy a life outside of work. As a wife and mother of a high school senior, Francis leads by example.

"I've gotten to the point where I can say, 'No, Mr. Client, I can't do that for you right now,' " Francis says. "I hope I'm teaching them how to have balance in their lives."

She is, says Ekstrom, who works reduced hours to accommodate her daughters, who are 4 and 6.

"I tell all my friends and family about the shopping spree because it's real exciting," Ekstrom says, "but what's really important to me is the flexibility. That's what keeps me in the workforce.

"There's never a guilt trip, because she does it. Kristi understands that that we are working women whose first priority is our family. That allows us to give excellent client service and still be there for our children."