**Case Study -**  **Organizational Culture and Strategy towards Employees at W.L. Gore & Associates, Inc.**

**Background**

W.L. Gore & Associates, Inc. is a global, privately held company headquartered in Newark, Delaware. It employs approximately 8,000 employees (called associates) in more than 45 locations worldwide. Founded by a husband-and-wife team in 1958, its manufacturing operations are clustered in the U.S., Germany, Japan, China and Scotland. There are three sites in Scotland, two in Livingston and one in Dundee, employing approximately 450 people. Gore produces proprietary technologies with versatile polymer polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) used in products in the health care and leisure industries. It is especially known for products like GORE-TEX**®** and ELIXIR strings. Gore is known not just for its innovative products, but also for its innovative business style (Gore’s written business objective is “*To make money and have fun*”). Gore strives to create a unique corporate culture. Quite simply, the culture is driven, according to co-founder Bill Gore, from the need to “*foster the creativity and initiative that contribute to technical development.*”

**Corporate Culture and Working Hours**

The organizational culture is founded on a team-based environment where teams are organized around opportunities and leaders emerge. Teams are fluid and comprise followers and leaders. Employees, known as associates, have no defined job titles, only general task/responsibility areas. Leaders emerge naturally by demonstrating special knowledge, a skill and/or experience that will move the business objective forward. According to Ann Gillies, an associate in the HR team in Scotland, leaders are defined not by organizational status but by ‘followership’ because of “personal influence, not power”. The roles of leaders and followers are interchangeable by work projects.

All associates have a sponsor, or mentor, assigned to guide them to “chart a course in the organization that will offer personal fulfilment while maximizing their contribution to the enterprise.” In this way, associates can alternately—and simultaneously—be leader, follower and sponsor. Enabling this corporate culture of teamwork is a commitment to four basic principles (as espoused by Bill Gore) that drive the organization’s activities:

* **Fairness** to each other and everyone with whom they come into contact.
* **Freedom** to encourage, help and allow other associates grow in knowledge, skill and scope of responsibility.
* The ability to make one’s own **commitments** and keep them.
* Consultation with other associates before undertaking actions that could affect the reputation of the company by hitting it “**below the waterline**.”

It is the corporate culture based on the four fundamental principles that integrates and enables work-life balance at W.L. Gore. Gillies believes Gore operates fairly and that associates are not managed but instead manage themselves by being fair, meeting commitments and consulting others as appropriate. Consequently, there are very few company policies, procedures or rules; practices develop naturally and do not need to be framed in policies. There are no policies and procedures, therefore, that explicitly relate to work-life balance. However, the company’s approach to work life balance can be seen in its approach to working hours. Working hours, according to Gillies, are central to Gore’s approach. There are no set working hours; “people make commitments… they are never imposed and people keep to their commitments.” Gillies continues, “Personal and family responsibilities are okay—people have no need to explain if they are not going to be at work, but tend to anyway because we are fair to each other.” When commitments require staffing for specific hours, the team in that area decide individuals’ hours of work.

Some people choose to work from home, and office attendance is recorded only for fire safety. The need to work long hours can arise, as it did for one associate, Ben Stewart, currently a leader, when he was involved in a global project requiring him to spend large amounts of time in the U.S. When a change in his home circumstances arose, Stewart evaluated the time he spent travelling and reduced it significantly by using videoconferencing and conference calls. He adds that his sponsor also encouraged him to travel less, and to take time off to compensate when he does travel.

**Outcomes**

It is widely believed that Gore’s corporate culture which encourages a healthy worklife balance directly contributes to the award-winning success the company has long enjoyed. John Kennedy, a Gore leader and senior associate in Scotland in traditional, external business terms, underlines this belief. He says, “Our culture and principles drive very high performance from individuals and teams, who are empowered and results-oriented with a strong ‘can-do’ attitude.” Gillies acknowledges that “sometimes it feels like it would be easy and certainly quicker to direct, but in the long-term, we know that doesn’t work.” She is emphatic that “because we are not telling people what to do and when to be here, there is more chance work is going to be done better. Associates buy into what the company stands for, so the quality of input and decisions is better.”

For Stewart, one of the challenges facing associates is that it is “very easy to get caught up in the positive environment and find yourself over-committing.” To counteract this, he notes that “leaders, sponsors and associates need to understand each individual situation and act appropriately.” Kennedy supports this position: “It can be easy to get caught up in an environment of high energy and activity.”

**Answer the Questions:**

1. What are the key elements in the corporate culture at W.L. Gore that may prevent employees from taking advantage of there being no set work hours?
2. How would you describe the management style and management responsibilities in this company?
3. What are some challenges employers may face when trying to implement W.L. Gore’s distinctive approach to work-life balance in different countries of its operations?
4. What elements of this company’s approach to work-life balance could be adopted by other organizations?

**TIPS:**

* Look at the website - <https://www.gore.com/en/about/culture> to get extra information
* Look at the article about Gore and Associates at Information System-folder with this seminar (article - Bloombeg BusinessWeek)