When a new flour-milling company—Ardent Mills—opened for business in 2014, the journey to defining an employer brand that spoke to the mission, vision and values of the organization had just begun.

It wasn’t as simple as starting from scratch. Combining the operations of ConAgra Mills and Horizon Milling, a Cargill-CHS joint venture, Ardent Mills brought together 40 mills along with two bakery-mix facilities and a specialty bakery spanning Canada, the United States, and Puerto Rico. Led by CEO Dan Dye, the Ardent Mills leadership team was eager to foster the development of a new company culture that would differentiate the young organization from its parent companies while speaking to its unique value proposition as an innovator, supplier, and employer.

Developing a people-focused organization where everyone—not just senior leadership—plays an important role requires a comprehensive framework, clear alignment with the broader business strategy, and an ongoing focus to bring it to life. Ardent Mills understood early on what kind of company it wanted to be and the story behind its Employee Value Proposition (EVP)—which it calls ‘Our Promise’—is in many ways a best-in-class approach to the development and implementation of an EVP.

Where to begin.

From Day One, Ardent Mills had a very clear mission, vision, and values and leadership, along with the support of the HR team, worked to build initiatives, drive efficiencies, and realize growth opportunities in ways that leveraged this strong foundation.
A couple years into the journey, team members could articulate what Ardent Mills stood for, but there seemed to be a gap between the mission, vision, and values and what they meant to and for each person.

“We believe that every person within this organization is a leader. They show up and lead others and lead themselves in some capacity or another,” said Deon MacMillan, Ardent Mills CHRO. The creation of a separate set of leadership principles closed the gap by clearly defining how each and every team member could live out the mission, vision, and values on a daily basis.

Layer upon layer, the stage was set to develop a language around the Ardent Mills EVP that would help to ensure a consistent culture and experience for all team members. Partnering with Korn Ferry to better capture input from around the business and to develop a comprehensive library of associated assets and collateral, the Ardent Mills team set out to define its EVP in late 2017.

It had been three and half years since Ardent Mills opened for business, but the process could not have begun any earlier. Getting all team members on board with the mission, vision, and values of the organization and developing a set of expectations that brought them to life were necessary steps in the development of the EVP. With this steady and thoughtful approach, connections were made and elements of earlier sentiment were leveraged at each step. The framework was intricate, weaving together key concepts and guiding principles, ultimately setting the tone for the development of an EVP.
Defining the Ardent Mills experience.

The HR team had conducted pulse surveys multiple times a year to gauge team member sentiment and, in addition, had collected as much data—in the form of metrics and feedback—in an effort to understand how team members felt about working at Ardent Mills. A key piece of the EVP discovery process was to turn over this information, which included every survey comment, to the Korn Ferry team, demonstrating the organization’s willingness to be transparent about where it was coming from in order to get where it wanted to go.

Working in close partnership with Ardent Mills HR team and senior leadership, Korn Ferry collected input from across the business. They conducted interviews with leadership and organized internal focus groups across the business, both in-person and virtually. They sought input from functional team members, plant team members, and the Ardent Mills network of engagement ambassadors. It was important each and every voice was heard. External focus groups were conducted and studies of competitors and great employers were reviewed to better understand what differentiated Ardent Mills from industry and market peers.

An analysis of information collected yielded the beginning of an EVP statement, a phrase that would define the team member experience at Ardent Mills. Iteration after iteration took place, until the team landed upon what they felt encapsulated the company’s mission, vision, values, and leadership principles and what they believed would also resonate with each and every team member.

From the conversations and language around EVP evolved ‘Our Promise’—it is “Together, we make Ardent Mills.” It’s a promise the company intends to keep and what it wants to be true for all team members across the business.

Though senior leadership does play an important role in setting the tone, culture isn’t something that comes from the top down. It happens on the plant floor, in the break room, at the coffee machine. It’s the experience one gets interacting with team members and walking around an Ardent Mills facility.

With this understanding, and with the vested interest from leaders like CEO Dan Dye, the Promise provided a direction for team member experience. It’s through the rollout and continued infusion of the Promise into all team member touch points that it will become more and more ingrained within the culture of Ardent Mills.

Recipe for success.

A vested interest in the development of the Promise on behalf of senior leadership and its clear connection to the business strategy were critical in gaining the kind of visibility this initiative needed to make an impact.

“It became increasingly important to really ensure the messaging around the strategy was that our people are very much a part of this,” said Dan Dye, Ardent Mills CEO. “In fact, we can’t execute on the strategy, we can’t be successful with the strategy without really thinking about our people and their role in it.”
With Dan leading the way, the Promise became part of the Ardent Mills five-year strategy. As a company that is passionate about the customer’s experience in a business where touch points with customers happen at every level of the organization, the motivation for embedding the EVP work within the strategy was a simple one. The customer experience would never be better than their team member experience, and thus investing in their people wasn’t just the right thing to do. It was the smart thing to do.

“Dan Dye is incredibly passionate about our vision, our values, our mission. Not only does he set the tone with his actions, but he has clear expectation for others, and what Ardent Mills should be,” said Heidi Frankosky, Ardent Mills HR Integration Leader. “His commitment to helping the process around the development of the Promise was invaluable, as was his involvement in its roll-out.”

In June of 2018, the Promise was introduced at the annual leadership meeting with team member images lining the walls, scattered on tables, and flashing across the large screen. The Promise was loudly declared and supported by compelling videos that shared inspirational stories about the people that make Ardent Mills. The personal stories didn’t just highlight the impact team members had on customers, but also on other members of their communities, both inside and outside of Ardent Mills. Their experiences exemplified the Promise, a collection of stories demonstrating team members’ daily commitment to create a better working environment for colleagues and a better experience for customers.

Once it was introduced, each leader was asked to provide a commitment to carrying out the Promise by filling out a commitment card. Only through a shared commitment to each other and to Ardent Mills on behalf of all team members across the organization could the Promise be brought to life. The cards were collected and are being distributed six months after the meeting as a reminder of the leaders’ commitment and an example of the organization’s continued focus on the Promise.

Tying the Promise to the strategy proved particularly important as a roadshow was rolled out to introduce the organization’s five-year plan. During each of those sessions, with a senior leader always in attendance, time was spent introducing the Promise with a similar presentation to the one shared during the leadership meeting. Videos were played and commitment cards filled out.

The rollout of the Promise reached every Ardent Mills location and was received enthusiastically, but in many ways the process had only begun. Shortly after the introduction, the Promise was immediately reinforced in trainings, performance discussions, messages from leadership, and in a 5-part video series called “Hearts of Grain.” Within each message resounded with the declaration, that “Together, we make Ardent Mills.”

**Early learnings.**

The Promise is still in its early days, and while it may be too soon to point to tangible results, feedback from the business has been positive. As Heidi Frankosky put it, “I would say we have been building this people-centered culture for some time and the Promise is the icing on the cake that helps to further illustrate what we are hoping and trying to achieve.”

Thanks to the launch of the Promise, increased retention of top talent is one data point the team hopes to be able to point to in the near future, but in the four in a half years since Ardent Mills began operations there has already been a five percentage point reduction in turnover, resulting in savings of $2.5 million that can be tied back to the business. Leadership sees this as the result of a steady and consistent process to develop a people-focused culture. They expect to see metrics like these continue an upward trend as the Promise increasingly becomes part of the fabric of the organization.

While the initial focus was internal, Ardent Mills is looking to infuse the Promise into its hiring process and expects it will soon be able to tie its new value proposition to better quality of candidate pairing as well. And while there is much enthusiasm around the Promise, in defining company culture and the team
member experience, the leadership team and HR have opened the dialogue for team members to raise their hands when what they see and what they experience on a daily basis does not align with expectations. The Promise serves as a litmus test for team members who may not be a fit for the organization and a barometer for company culture across locations.

“I’ll be the first one to say we are not 100% there today. It’s a process and people lead in different ways and people will interpret the Promise in different ways. We have to help that process along, talk about it a lot, and make it very visible just like we did with our values,” said Dan Dye. He and his team see the Promise as a tool to help in more ways than one in ensuring a consistent experience for current and potential team members. Additional time and resources can now be more effectively dedicated to ensure this goal becomes a reality.

Next steps.

The team continues to bring the Promise to life through touch points with team members, which include internal messages and trainings, and through touch points with candidates, which include a new careers website and ongoing communications. With a solid foundation rooted in the organization’s mission, vision, values, and leadership principles and the support and enthusiasm of senior leaders, along with a tangible link to the broader business strategy, “Together, we make Ardent Mills” is off to a promising start.

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We help clients synchronize strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organizations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.