

## Leadership Character Award Nomination

**Nominee:** Sanders International, Inc.

**Category:** Small Organization

### INTEGRITY

The financial industry has been marked by incredible change in the last decade. However, faced with growing competition and a volatile economy, Sanders International, Inc., (SII) a financial advisory and investment management firm based in Norcross, Georgia continues to grow and thrive. The company has succeeded because their philosophy is grounded in the belief that character and integrity are critical to day-to-day operations and long term strategic planning. This philosophy is one of the company's corporate values and it is evident in everything they do.

This core belief is demonstrated by several key practices at Sanders International including the following:

Many new businesses will accept any client to grow the business and gain revenue. SII feels strongly that the clients' views and values should reflect the company philosophy. Therefore, potential clients are discussed internally and clients are selected that fit an "ideal client profile". The result is a mutually beneficial and long lasting relationship between SII and its clients.

Referring to Sanders International, a client recently stated in a survey conducted by a marketing research firm, "*They have the same values as me - they are honest and straight shooters.*" Another client stated, "*They listen and understand what your values are.*"

Unlike many financial firms, SII is a "fee-only" firm, which means that the planners are compensated solely by their clients, and do not accept commissions or compensation of any kind based on the products that they recommend. Clients are guaranteed complete disclosure of all fees, prior to entering into a contract with SII. This practice demonstrates remarkable integrity and sets SII apart from other firms that are focused on selling the next product. All of SII's advice is in the clients' best interest and solely in their interest.

In addition, because the company operates in a volatile industry, where the unexpected can happen, SII is committed to communicating promptly with clients. The firm contacts clients immediately if there is any negative news they need to be aware of that may impact their investments and together, they design a course of action to address the situation at hand. "*They epitomize customer service,*" said a Sanders International client

## **RESPECT**

SII realizes that a business is successful principally because of the employees' collective contributions. Together, the company and its employees have achieved goals, provided superior service to clients and achieved financial excellence. To be successful in today's ever-changing marketplace, SII realizes that the company must sustain a work environment where people are respected, talent is fostered and employees' views and ideas are embraced. Every task performed by an employee is considered a valuable contribution to the overall success of the company.

SII's policy is one of open communications with employees. Senior management maintains an open-door management policy, to give employees at all levels the freedom to walk into their offices and discuss issues of concern. The company uses several vehicles to ensure that there is constant and effective two-way communication with employees. These include monthly team meetings, team outings and strategic retreats, monthly electronic newsletters, holiday celebrations, personal milestone celebrations, etc.

Respecting employees as individuals means recognizing different cultural backgrounds and making diversity a key part of the company's corporate values. Currently, 80% of SII employees are women or minorities. SII believes that a diverse work environment enriches the environment and leads to greater creativity, improved leadership effectiveness, a more fulfilling employee experience and ultimately, increased value to clients.

SII also provides employees with a variety of benefits and resources designed to help balance the demands of work and personal life. Some of them include:

Vacation and Personal Days

Commitment to Community Day

Flex-time

Tuition Aid

Employee Expense Reimbursement

Sick days for family illness and bereavement leave

SII also works with employees to offer savings programs that help them build an income for the future:

401(k) Account – SII offers a match up to 6% percent of each employee's contribution to his or her 401(k) plan.

The company offers coverage's that help protect employees against the unexpected including the AFLAC cafeteria plan. This plan allows team members to purchase insurance that they may find valuable to protect themselves and their family including: disability insurance, accident insurance and terminal illness insurance. In addition, the plan allows employees to deduct healthcare costs on a pre-tax basis.

SII supports a number of professional development and educational programs offered outside of the company so employees can enhance their learning. These include

leadership development programs, investing and financial planning seminars, compliance conferences, etc.

SII is committed to honoring employees with a special bonus program for exemplary work. The bonus is determined by the individual's performance as well as the company's success during the previous year. The company hasn't missed one year of bonus payments, even during the 2000-2002 bear market when large firms were cutting or eliminating bonuses.

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

Through solid leadership, communication and community presence, employees know they can be proud of SII. Different opinions and views are embraced at the company and contribute to the effectiveness of the organization. From the helm throughout the ranks of the company, each individual participates in company decision making and everyone's voice is heard.

Leadership has a responsibility to the employees to provide structure, guidance and communication and those attributes are priorities within the company and essential to the success of SII. All members of the SII team have written commitments and expectations that they strive to achieve every six months. While employees are supported and encouraged by management, the company has created a culture where individuals are empowered to use their knowledge, skills and tools to achieve their goals effectively.

In addition, the SII team has a responsibility to the clients to act with honesty and integrity and do everything they can to support the needs and goals of those they serve.

As mentioned earlier, SII does not accept referral fees or commission, so all of the advice given is in the clients' best interest. Unlike many firms, the company works with their clients' extended families and other members of their professional team to ensure that a comprehensive array of financial services are delivered in the most cohesive, cost effective way. Clients are confident that SII provides objective advice based solely on their best interests and the company proves it through their actions time after time. *"They treat their clients like family,"* stated a Sanders International client.

## **Story Related as an Illustration of This Person's Leadership Character**

Sanders International was founded on distinct principles and values and those values have not wavered in the last decade. Character is the cornerstone of those values.

The company enjoys a rich history of reputation as a stable, high performance, responsible company. While holding onto core values of integrity, excellence and respect, the individuals at SII work as a team to deliver quality services to clients.

The company's commitment to character extends into the communities SII serves. SII has a rich tradition of serving those in need. In addition to sponsoring non-profits through financial and in-kind support, SII also provides pro-bono services to individuals in the community that are in desperate need of financial services.

Many of these individuals are single parents who are in debt, aren't receiving child support, and need financial planning assistance to get back on their feet. While there are numerous examples of this commitment to community, one particular incident involved a single mother with three children who was not receiving child support. This individual did not have a college education, therefore, had limited marketable skills. SII worked closely with this individual, contacted her creditors to design payment plans, and developed a comprehensive financial plan for her that has allowed her to remain debt free.