



## The Core of the Vision

We sat down with AGRS president and chief executive officer, John Graf recently for a talk about core values, the future of the company, and how we as employees can help lead the changes in our company and industry.

**Q:** What is your vision for the company and its employees?

**A:** As Tom West said on December 1 at the Stakeholders meeting, we want to be "America's Retirement Company." To make this a reality, we need to find ways to serve more customers with additional products, and in doing that, create more opportunities for our employees and reps to grow and develop.

**Q:** Describe the working environment you envision for the company.

**A:** We're a community of knowledgeable, terribly hard-working, wonderful people. In recognition of that, I'd like to see a much more open environment in which all employees share ideas and challenges, and are made a key part of the decision-making process. I think we can do a better job of listening to our employees as we develop ways to meet our challenges. I think we can also do a better job of communicating, to the customers, reps, and employees, what's happening in the marketplace and with the competition, so they have a better understanding of why we're changing.

### Straightforward communication

**Q:** That sounds like one of our core values.

**A:** Right. Straightforward communication is absolutely essential in an environment of rapid change. We cannot afford to make big decisions on less than total and clear information.

### People make the difference

**Q:** How do you personally incorporate the core value of "People make the difference," into your work?

**A:** I host a president's coffee every week at 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday mornings. 10 people from around the company, who might otherwise not have an opportunity to talk to me or some of the other folks in management, are invited. They

have the opportunity to ask questions, raise issues, and voice concerns. It's pretty much an hour and a half of open dialogue. We discuss whatever they want to discuss. It runs the gamut from why the Woodson tower elevators are so slow to why we are launching mutual funds, and why we are going through a systems infrastructure change.

**Q:** What happens to the information you gather in these breakfasts?

**A:** The executive management team discusses the comments and questions, and action plans are then communicated in our weekly management forums. We note what has been resolved and keep track of the progress on initiatives that grow out of the "breakfasts."

**Q:** While focusing on the big picture, what other ways do you stay in touch with the corporate community?

**A:** I do a little bit of "walking around," talking to the employees, and I sometimes call a regional manager or rep just to say hi and see how things are going, or I take a call from a customer who has a complaint. From time to time I call our clients and spend half an hour or an hour talking about either their problem or their success story with us.

### Empowerment and performance

**Q:** What plans do you have for giving the employees more power and how does that relate to performance culture?

**A:** We're putting more power in the hands of the individual. That presumes that people can make the difference, not a policy book or a system. We've got talented people who know the right thing to do for our clients. We're going to give them the tools, guidance, and power to make and implement decisions, and if they perform, they'll be rewarded. We want our employees to make a difference for the organization.

### Focusing on the values

**Q:** How can we stay focused on our core values?

**A:** I think we have to live them every day. They are basic human values. There's nothing revolutionary here. If you respect people, you will allow them to make the difference, and tell them straight what is going on. You will also operate with integrity and have the energy and drive to succeed.

### Energy and drive to succeed

**Q:** What gives you the energy and drive to succeed? What keeps you going?

**A:** I get excited by the chance to do something really great for people who are out there trying to help other people. At AGRS, we have the opportunity to help retirees and often people who don't get paid very well, such as teachers and hospital employees. They are doing some of the greatest work in the world, and to be able to help them help themselves is very gratifying. And, to be able to do that as a business is terrific. It's something you and I can be excited about, and feel good about.

**Q:** Do you think work should be fun? What makes it fun for you?

**A:** Work has to be fun or it's not worth doing. What makes it fun for me is the chance to watch people enjoy their own accomplishments. I have fun watching people come up with ideas, solve problems, and finish projects. I get turned on by people. I love to see their sense of pride.

### Dreams and visions

**Q:** In a serious business like investing for retirement can we create a sense of fun without seeming too frivolous?

**A:** Absolutely. You know, the reason we want to have money for retirement is not so we can sit at home and watch TV. We need to recognize the



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reason people invest for retirement is to have fun. The American General advertising theme is right on point; we're dealing with helping people dream. We're not selling stock funds, we're selling a dream. We're appealing to their greatest sense of creativity and enthusiasm for the future. Anyone who thinks investing or saving for retirement is only a "serious" business misses the fundamental point. It should be fun, and it should be wrapped up in our clients' dreams for their future.

### Understanding the customer

**Q:** What's the most important advice you can give employees who want to create a positive future with this company?

**A:** Keep learning. Learn every day about what our customers need, and what we can do to help them solve their problems. Learn what appeals to their aspirations and dreams. Come to understand better the role we play in their retirement planning. If you really understand the customer, you will do the right thing for them, whether you're designing a service platform, developing a product, or trying to sell something.

**Q:** What's the most important thing you'd like to say to your employees and Retirement Planning Specialists?

**A:** You really do make the difference, and your management is committed to listening to you, empowering you, and giving you the opportunity and tools to do what's right for the customer. In doing that, the company and those who work for it will be successful.