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AERO Group goes out of its way to take care of people

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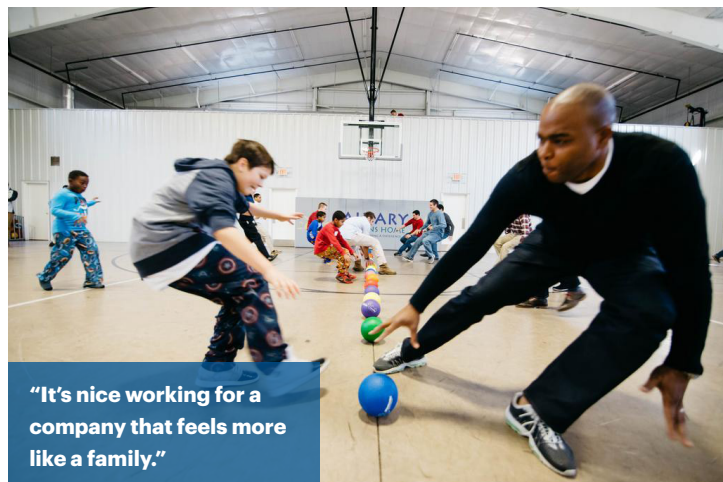
After receiving his degree in electrical engineering, Charles “Alan” Barge was hired by a company to work on ground-support gate systems at airports. “I had a few problems with that company,” said Barge, principal and president of AERO Systems Engineering Inc. For starters, he hated the way the company treated its employees. Barge also believed the company had a flawed vision for the future. So in 1997, Barge and a few compatriots borrowed \$8,000, leased storage space in a warehouse, and launched AERO Systems Engineering.

In the course of its 21-year history, AERO Group – comprised of AERO Systems Engineering (the design side) and AERO Bridgeworks (the construction side, added in 1999) – has worked at nearly every airport in the United States and for almost every airline—including Delta Air Lines, Southwest, American, as well as United Parcel Service, the U.S. Navy

and the U.S. Air Force. With nine offices across the U.S., AERO Group has built nearly 15,000 gate positions in projects totaling more than \$500 million.

Not that it’s been smooth sailing since day one. After 9/11, a lot of aviation-related companies hit hard times. Instead of letting people go, AERO paid out more than \$1 million to keep its people employed – even though there was no work for them to do. “I knew [business] would come back and when it did we’d have the employees to do it,” Barge explained. In the last few years, insurance premiums increased and the only way to keep the fees reasonable was for the company to offer plans with an increased deductible – \$10,000, up from the previous plan’s \$5,000. Rather than pass that increase on to employees, AERO committed to pay any cost incurred by employees if they exceeded the old deductible limit. “You need to be creative about how you take care of your people,” said Barge. “We go out of our way.”

AERO Group’s approx-



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imately 65 Atlanta-based employees clearly appreciate Barge’s leadership and the culture of the company. This year, they voted it the No. 1 Medium Employer to work for in Atlanta Business Chronicle’s Best Places to Work survey.

Barge describes AERO Group as his family. His employees are aware of how much the company and its employees mean to Barge and they appreciate it. “AERO really cares for its employees and goes out of its way to show it,” wrote an AERO employee in the Best Places to Work survey. “It’s nice working for a company that feels more like a

family.” Another employee added that AERO Group’s “primary goal is to build long-lasting relationships with employees and clients by treating them with respect.”

Next year, Barge plans to retire. Rather than sell the company to a third party, he plans to sell it to the employees, at a discount, in the form of an employee stock ownership plan, or ESOP. He plans to offer financing to employees who want to take part but may not have the means. “I want to help these people who have helped me for decades get where they need to be,” he said.