

Retaining Talented Staff

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One of the most critical resources of any successful organization is often the least recognized. Undeniably, you must have active volunteers, donors who give a lot and give often, and as much public awareness as you can generate. With so many things competing for a director's attention, staffing issues often become a priority only when office tension becomes unbearable, or turnover becomes so great that it threatens the viability of a special event.

In this article, I explore several aspects of successfully staffing your organization including retention, training, professional development, performance evaluation, and promotion. Of course, successful organizations also face challenges we must examine such as lack of resources, competition for talent, difficult employees, and problem performance. Let's get started!

Finding talented professionals for your organization can be a challenge. Many nonprofits provide compensation and benefits packages that cannot compete with those of other local employers or face the risk of losing their key employees to equally important but competing agencies.

Staff turnover can reduce your organizational capacity and compromise efficiency, inhibit growth, and threaten the satisfaction of remaining employees. The costs can quickly escalate, from advertising expenses to lost productivity as your time becomes absorbed by managing a search and covering the responsibilities of an unfilled position. What can you do to reduce turnover and keep your staff happy?

Set clear expectations for all employees. Provide relevant and detailed job descriptions and review them annually with the employee, adjusting them as needed. Take time for orientation of new employees or staff who move into new roles. Ask open-ended questions after giving assignments to be sure employees understand their responsibilities. Just as important, encourage them to ask you questions.

Understand what motivates your staff and what environments support their success. Some employees are drawn to nonprofit work because they want to 'make a difference.' Others are motivated by a desire to work with a specific population or the specific services provided. Lifestyles, family backgrounds, and previous experiences all shape an employee's choice of employment and help define what motivates them to be successful. Do they seek praise and recognition, leadership opportunities, or a flexible lifestyle? Would they like to be involved in many projects across the organization, or do they most enjoy focusing on the details? Do they work well individually, or as part of a project

team? Many interview questions not only help screen applicants prior to hiring but also go a long way to establishing and maintaining 'fit.'

Seek cost-effective benefits to help employees and find creative ways to make your organization desirable. Implement flexible spending account options, provide parking, allow flexible work schedules, encourage (and pay for) professional development trainings and conferences, pay for professional or networking organization memberships (i.e., Chamber, NSFRE, Rotary, etc). Partner with neighboring businesses or those with whom you have an existing relationship to offer fitness membership discounts, restaurant coupons, or other services.

Ask employees what they want! Provide them with choices, give them a survey, or have a volunteer conduct a focus group with your staff if that might make them more comfortable. The key is to give them the chance to speak up, and then see what you can do to accommodate some of their desires.

Provide regular feedback, conduct performance evaluations, and work with each employee to set meaningful goals. Employees will feel more engaged in the organization and more responsible for success when their efforts are acknowledged. Give them opportunities to evaluate their own performance and seek their input in establishing short-term and long-term goals. The key here is also to follow up on those goals, reward successes, and readjust as necessary. While it can be time consuming for you, your employees are counting on it.

Say thank you. Your staff came to work for you knowing that company cars and holiday bonuses weren't on the horizon, but studies have shown that saying "thank you" can go a long way for retaining staff morale. Take time to acknowledge and appreciate employee efforts in staff gatherings, board meetings, events, newsletters, whenever possible. Attribute successes to your staff at every opportunity with vendors, sponsors, volunteers, and donors. Recognizing performance can make the achieving employee feel valued, as well as encouraging less effective staff strive to aim higher.

Review compensation and benefits regularly. If you do many of these things and still find yourself interviewing once a year or more for the same position, examine your compensation and benefits offerings. Contact some colleagues or a consultant (www.dogoodconsulting.org) and get a sense for the 'market.' An investment in this now may save you another expensive search and months of training another new employee.

Even if you have employees that have remained loyal for two or three years, it's a good idea to provide annual increases whenever possible (3-5% is common) and to periodically conduct a compensation analysis. (Note: many professional organizations as well as internet resources provide free salary comparison tools.)