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Nonprofit Workers Need to Be Inspired to Stay on the Job



By Sean Burke, Amit Patel, Deborah Snyder, and Michael Watson

What would nonprofit leaders do if they were told they could lose 30 to 50 percent of their cash and physical assets within the next 12 months?

They would probably hold urgent meetings to gather senior staff members together to devise a survival plan, ask board members for their ideas, and call peers to identify steps that could be taken to avoid losses.

Most nonprofit executives face a similar challenge today. But instead of buildings, property, cash reserves, and investments, an even more precious resource is in jeopardy: their employees.

As *The Chronicle* noted in a survey of staff members of nonprofits, at least 80 percent of workers were actively seeking new positions—or would if the economy were stronger.

Chief executives can turn this situation around, but only if they take action themselves rather than delegating it to others. They must recognize that they need to go beyond satisfying workers and to motivate them to contribute to the organization's mission.

Nonprofit leaders should work to make sure their employees put extra effort into each task and strive to meet challenging goals. What's more, they should inspire their workers to do all they can to help the people the nonprofit serves and ensure that they take pride in their work.

Nonprofits with low turnover recognize how much workers care about their employers' mission. Our research shows that more than eight in 10 employees of nonprofits say mission is important.

That's why showing individuals how their actions contribute directly and indirectly to the group's success is so important. That will create a sense of shared accomplishment and accountability for the mission's success. For example, the top leadership can set annual organization-level performance goals and ask everyone to set his or her own benchmarks in ways that will directly help achieve the organization's mission.

A national medical association we work with created measures for the overall organization, each division, and each worker so they would have data to show all employees how they contributed to the mission.

But aside from focusing on mission, nonprofit leaders would be wise to take five steps to help bind their employees closer to the organization:

Gather data. Organizations need to know how engaged employees are now before identifying ways to improve and to measure progress. A low-cost online survey sent to the staff is all that's needed. The chief executive should send a cover note with the survey explaining why the organization wants to know more about worker morale and reassuring employees that their comments and assessments will be kept anonymous.

Seek to understand employees. Review the results with an eye on what has changed since the previous year. Seek to put the results into context, considering both outside forces, such as the economy and hiring trends, and internal developments, such as new programs or leadership changes.

Let employees know that you've heard their concerns. Communicate the results of the survey to the work force in written communications, such as an e-mail from the CEO, or in a presentation at staff meetings. Identify the top and bottom measures as well as the key changes from the previous year's survey.

Tell workers what you learned. Acknowledge areas for improvement or particular sources of concern. Congratulate the organization on improvements from the previous year. Identify the priorities that shape what comes next.

Take action. Develop ways to take action on weaknesses identified in the survey. Seek employee contributions to build a sense of shared goals.

Today's work force is complex, diverse, and multigenerational. That's why most of the solutions that come from employee surveys must involve many new options, not just one.

For example, most nonprofits will find that work-life balance is a big priority for employees. Think about offering a combination of approaches to deal with that concern, including telecommuting, part-time, and job-sharing options; seminars on stress management; and fitness and health incentives.

We recently worked with a large private foundation that had tried to improve the work-life balance but with little success. Many employees believed that telecommuting or nonstandard work hours were benefits arbitrarily and unfairly granted only to certain employees.

The foundation held an employee brainstorming session in which workers pointed out that flexible work arrangements could be an opportunity to keep people dedicated. That conversation encouraged the organization's leaders to establish guidelines that supervisors could use to set priorities based on worker results and manage flexible work arrangements among the employees they supervised.

Aside from reducing the stresses of balancing family and work life, nonprofits could do much to keep workers loyal by offering them new ways to build their skills. Give people opportunities to work with peers in other departments or create committees of workers to devise ways to solve specific problems. Hold brown-bag sessions at which workers can share ideas that have helped them on the job.

Such actions cost very little money to carry out. Other free or low-cost ideas include creating awards that honor outstanding contributions or making sure that

leaders say thank you for a job well done, including e-mail messages that acknowledge a person's or a team's accomplishments so everyone in the organization knows about them. Hold group lunches and celebrations and invite the top leadership—or offer a chance for outstanding workers to get one-on-one time with senior leaders.

What matters most in increasing employee engagement is not the dollars an organization spends but its systematic, demonstrable commitment to responding to employees' concerns.

Our research shows that 97 percent of the most highly engaged employees are willing to take on extra work to do their jobs well.

Organizations that are willing to reciprocate by honoring and listening to their workers will get a direct benefit as those employees make progress in carrying out the group's mission.

When a nonprofit's work force deeply trusts that its employer's intentions are genuine and opportunities are real, enduring, and focused on development, leaders will no longer need to worry about a potential turnover problem.

Sean Burke, Amit Patel, and Deborah Snyder work at Accenture, where they advise nonprofits and other organizations on ways to improve employee performance and loyalty. Michael Watson is senior vice president for human resources and diversity at Girl Scouts of the USA. You can download their report on [advice for nonprofit managers](#)