

Happy Knot: Managing Workplace Culture Risk



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This week I've been reading *The Economist's* potpourri of prognostications: "The World in 2018." In his introduction to the publication, editor Daniel Franklin writes that, "It promises to be a nerve-jangling year." Check! In my recent risk adventures, it seems like many nonprofit leaders are either waiting for the other shoe to drop, or holding their breaths and hoping "Not Me."

Nobody wants a nerve-jangled staff in 2018; happy staff members are more productive and engaged. One of the greatest and most common nerve-janglers in the workplace is the speedy, sloppy separation of team members. I was reminded of this recently when a close friend asked for tips negotiating the end of his own 15-year tenure in an organization. As a manager overseeing multiple teams, his experience with the company's culture—its true colors—was largely in the role of someone doling out praise, but sometimes included facilitating staff departures. It wasn't until my friend left his own role that he understood how this transition feels.

Spend a few minutes reading a story of yet another swift departure at a brand-name organization, and you'll agree that dysfunctional culture is a mega risk for all employers. Yet many nonprofits continue to band-aid dysfunctional workplace culture rather than address it at its core. Staff dissatisfaction, departures, and nerve-jangling relate to cultural practices such as:

- **Say It, Don't Do It:** Executive proclamations that "we care about our staff," sound like empty sentiment when no action is taken to affirm the supposed caring, or worse, valued team members go missing.
- **Policy Trumps People:** Loquacious language is added to already-too-long and confusing anti-harassment, non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies; related training focuses on protecting the organization itself (i.e., "how to avoid legal liability"), but fails to help the players on the team.
- **Salt in the Wound:** Low-value rewards risk turning moderately engaged staff into disillusioned cynics.

At my friend's former employer, the company actually implemented a "Taco Tuesdays" program to fire-up the front line. In this case, no food was provided nor was there much risk of violating the trademark for the slogan, which was registered by Taco John's in 1989. A "taco" was a kudo; the campaign was a reminder to tout the triumphs of the team, at least on Tuesdays.

Not surprisingly, Taco Tuesday didn't produce the productivity and joy that executives expected. What can and should you do to inspire genuine contentment in your nonprofit workplace?

- **Engage in real, albeit difficult conversations:** Put down the pithy pronouncements and tune in to the

fears and concerns that truly affect happiness at work. Ask your team: “What are you worried about? What dangerous, slippery slopes can you see from your vantage point?” Heads up: some staff will be sensing change that is necessary for success or sustainability. Others might express fears based on water cooler whispering or groundless gossip from the grapevine. Don’t denigrate the fears and worries of team members; reassure by being painfully transparent about what’s ahead. At NRMC we often recommend that new CEOs conduct a listening tour: meeting with small groups of staff to personally invite and hear their comments, cares and concerns. If you can hear the jingle of rattling nerves in your workplace, don’t wait until turnover at the top to try this technique.

- **Celebrate memories of departing staff:** In the wake of layoffs, terminations, and voluntary departures, some teams react poorly. My friend’s employer typically announced employee departures by emailing the entire company a message like: “John Doe is gone, but don’t panic. We’ll be just fine without him.” While shared with the intention to rally the troops, a callous goodbye message like this stirs more anxiety than resolve. When saluting separating staff members, celebrate their achievements and impact on your organization. Show remaining staff that they will be thanked someday, too. Sincerity and transparency prevent transition trauma.
- **Fess up to failure:** Last year we heard a wonderful story from an impressive nonprofit CEO who fell victim to a phishing test being conducted at his organization. He happily fessed up to the failure at an all-staff meeting and shared two lessons he learned from the experience: turn off autopilot when it’s time to peruse email messages, and if something “seems suspicious, it is suspicious!” Staff reacted to the CEO’s story with laughter and appreciation because they saw that he was human, just like them. Fess up to your own failures and your teammates will find the courage to follow you.
- **Ask your team to do less this year, not more:** I’ve replaced the ring of post-it reminders that once framed the monitor on my desk with a single note containing two tips: 1. “Work harder on doing less, better,” and 2. “Growth happens when people experience the good, the bad, and the ugly together.” If “doing more with less” is a familiar theme at your nonprofit, resolve to break the cycle and help your staff “do less, better.” As you gear up to face whatever mistakes and misfortunes await your mission this year, remember that one of the hardest parts of changing the world around you is taking time to truly see and change the person in the mirror.
- **Tally the toll of workplace stereotypes:** Few days go by without hearing a stereotype about a particular generation of workers. At NRMC we’ve learned that the ageist comments about our respective generations sting the most. Instead of expressing concern about yet another millennial stereotype, I recently dismissed the concerns of a millennial colleague by telling her that comments about older workers were more painful! Ouch. In the piece titled, “Older, wiser” in *The Economist’s* “The World in 2018,” special-reports editor Barbara Beck writes, “Since age discrimination is based on prejudice rather than rational argument, it needs to be fought on many fronts.” I would swap “age” with the word “any.” Beck’s thoughtful tips include “Being more careful with language,” and acknowledging that “training and education need to be a lifelong endeavor, not a one-time sprint at the beginning of a career.”
- **Demand a dose of disconnection:** “Happy now?” another piece from “The World in 2018” explores the stress, cynicism, and fatigue caused by the constant connection many employees experience at work in the digital age. In the nonprofit sector, many of us are expected to be “on” at all times; some of us even internalize pressure based on our fervent desires to better the world. To prevent burnout and sustain engagement, managers must demonstrate and communicate how to separate work time from personal time. If managers themselves work constantly, employees will naturally feel pressure to do the same—even if they aren’t directly asked to. During a recent [Enterprise Risk Assessment](#), the NRMC team was impressed to see an empty client office after our last meeting ended at 5:00pm. The organization’s CFO—our point of contact for the project—confirmed proudly that everyone goes home on time. He knew they would all return renewed tomorrow to continue fighting the good fight.

Workplace culture can be both a mission-motivator and detractor. Get in line at the water cooler to develop a clearer sense of the cultural norms that propel or damage your nonprofit. Turn your tired Taco Tuesday into a meaningful celebration of teamwork. De-jangle the nerves in your network and show your staff what they mean to your mission—and to you.

Resources:

- [How to be Happy at Work](#), by Annie McKee
- [“Can’t Buy Me Joy \(at Work\),”](#) *RISK eNews*, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Risk Management Leaders Must be Unstoppably Optimistic,”](#) *RISK eNews*, Nonprofit Risk Management Center

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about solutions to knotty workplace culture challenges, and your questions about NRMC products and services at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.