

The Goldilocks Principle: Creating a Culture That's Just Right



By

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices, Organizational Culture

One of your best employees just left the organization and you feel a sense of urgency to replace her. But is it simply time to fill the open chair with a warm body? If your expectations for performance are low, then almost any applicant will do. But if your mission is to make a difference in your community or in the world, you'll want to make wise hiring choices and invest in any new staff to help them succeed. One area that requires special attention anytime the makeup of the workforce is changing, is workplace culture.

What is Workplace Culture?

Culture is the sum of the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a shared group of people. Essentially, it is your nonprofit's personality. Although culture is something you can't see, it influences productivity and the willingness of team members to persevere and pull together to overcome the inevitable challenges in a nonprofit workplace. Culture is reflected in:

- How employees behave and interact
- Whether and how employees hold one another accountable
- How staff define good enough versus going the extra mile
- Shared values and beliefs
- The tone of spoken communication, from one-on-one conversations to group discussions at staff meetings
- The tone of written communication, from short text or instant messages to announcements of changes in policy sent to large groups via email

Risks of an Ineffective Culture

Have you ever worked for an organization where:

- The boss grumbled when employees socialized after work?
- The perks, pay raises and privileges were limited to staff with corner offices?
- Employees openly sabotaged one another?
- New hires were interviewed in secret and their identities unknown until their first day of work?

If any of those circumstances sound familiar, you've worked for a manager or organization that cared very little about workplace culture. The consequences of inattention to culture are serious. They include:

- Low commitment to mission
- Ineffective, nonexistent or insincere teamwork
- High turnover and frequent use of sick leave
- Frequent crisis events caused by poor communication or lack of coordination

Culture Change: Risk Recommendations

Changing the culture in a nonprofit is no easy task and you don't have the option of casting a magic spell to turn bad to good. To reduce the likelihood that an ineffective workplace culture will weaken your mission, consider the five risk tips below.

1. **Don't Spoon Feed Your Employees** - All nonprofit staff share the desire for some degree of autonomy. No one likes to be told what to do and how to do it every minute of the day. Ask: do our supervisors and managers allow staff to experiment, make decisions, and sometimes fail? When your culture allows staff to try new things and explore different ways of getting the job done, some of those new ways might wind up saving financial and other resources. When employees are boxed into the same way of accomplishing every task, boredom sets in along with rote focus on inputs, rather than real results.
2. **Answer the Door, Accountability is Knocking!** - Accountability means living up to the commitments you make. When nonprofit staff let each other down they also let the mission of the nonprofit down. True accountability requires candid conversations when a co-worker lets you down. Explain what didn't happen, the consequences of a dropped commitment, and listen with empathy to understand why. Discuss ways to support one another and live up to commitments the next time. Managers and supervisors should model the values of candor and respect by being candid and respectful with one another as well as their direct reports.
3. **Pay Attention to Size if You Want a Perfect Fit** - Your culture is in greatest jeopardy when your organization is growing or shrinking. Growing nonprofits often find it hard to sustain a family or small nonprofit atmosphere when new staff members arrive on a weekly basis. Thoughtful orientation programs become rushed meetings where packets are distributed. Don't ignore the risk of your culture becoming watered down as you grow. Convene a task group to brainstorm how to keep a connected, mission-focused culture alive and well during a growth spurt. If downsizing is necessary due to changes in your business model or available funding, recognize that remaining staff may have survivor's guilt or fear that they will be next. Worse, they may feel that the nonprofit has abandoned its commitment to staff. Resolve to be honest with all staff about necessary changes in structure and staffing and encourage questions about what's taking place as well as why it is necessary to sustain your mission.
4. **Never Leave Your Most Valuable Assets Unattended** - Most nonprofit employers describe employees as their most valuable assets. Yet some leaders pay scant attention to employee needs. A strong, collaborative culture begins in the corner offices at the nonprofit. When employees see the CEO and other senior leaders of a nonprofit going the extra mile for clients and co-workers, refusing to take arguably unethical shortcuts, and demonstrating sincere concern for the health and welfare of staff, a positive, affirming culture has the greatest opportunity to spread throughout the organization. Executives who are isolated or unavailable send a clear message that teamwork and camaraderie simply aren't important.
5. **Safety in Numbers: Remember the Rule of Three** - To start building a culture that your mission deserves, focus on 1. Employee engagement, 2. Self-forming teams, and 3. Transparency. Engage staff by asking employees what they think, rather than telling them what to think. Solicit input from every level in the organization about big and small changes—especially those related to changes in product/service mix or structure. You'll not only get the benefit of diverse points of view, but you'll increase the chances of buy-in when necessary changes are made. Empower staff to form and join teams as they see fit. Teamwork is the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations, yet many leaders continue to believe that assigning teams is a privilege that comes with a management title. Finally, demonstrate your commitment to internal transparency by generously sharing information and encouraging and promptly answering questions from staff. The only dumb question in a culture that values its employees is the question an employee was too afraid to ask.

Leading a nonprofit organization sometimes feels like a walk in a forest inhabited by not-so-friendly bears. But it needn't be that way. A commitment to growing and sustaining a positive, collaborative workplace culture is within the reach of every nonprofit leadership team. It may require some experimentation and the occasional burnt tongue or uncomfortable night's sleep. But the rewards are likely to greatly exceed the bumps, bruises and battles along the journey.

Melanie Herman is the Executive Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and thoughts about the intersection of workplace culture and risk management and can be reached

by email at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org. All staff members can be reached at 703.777.3504.