

Be The Boss You Want to Work For



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In last week's *Risk eNews*, Erin Gloeckner dared readers to promote workplace safety by managing the downside risk of employee sleep deprivation. In the *Schumpeter* column in this week's edition of *The Economist*, ("[The other side of paradise](#)," *The Economist*, January 16th, 2016), I was intrigued to learn that some tech employers have made napping convenient by providing "nap pods" for sleepy workers.

We have all caught wind of the quirky and astounding benefits offered by progressive tech companies, like slides, gourmet restaurants, and in-office medical care offered on some Google campuses. To attract and retain great staff members, should nonprofits emulate the employment practices and offer wow-factor benefits found in the tech sector? Perhaps not. According to a survey referenced in "The other side of paradise," software developers—in tech and non-tech firms alike—feel "alienated, trapped, underappreciated and otherwise discombobulated." And according to the survey of 5,000 engineers conducted by *TinyPulse*, a mere 19% of tech employees reported being happy at work, and even fewer—17%—felt "valued" by their employers.

Gourmet meals, nap pods and other benefits are often provided as a way to keep tech workers at work, tipping the work-life balance in favor of work and more work. Employers that make it easy to eat, nap, work out, and visit the doctor—all while at the office—put pressure on their employees to *stay* at the office and work long hours. Dr. Gerald Ledford at the University of Southern California's Marshall School refers to these rich benefits as "golden handcuffs." *The Economist* article also points out that a seemingly rich benefit, such as unlimited vacation, may have a "sinister undertone"—daring employees to take as little vacation as possible.

The business sector and tech industry are wonderful places to search for ideas about how to innovate, rebound, and balance risk and reward. But nonprofits should be *the* places our sister sectors—business and government—turn to for inspiration on how to treat employees. Nonprofit leaders should strive to become employers that others emulate. Here are a few tips.

- **Be a rule follower, not just a rule maker.** Pay close attention and follow the rules you set for others. A boss who ignores the rules that apply to everyone else risks disloyalty at best, mutiny and sabotage at worst.
- **Custom craft your policies to suit your culture.** Does your employee handbook contain stern warnings and inflexible policies that are inconsistent with how you really work? Strike a balance in employment policies and make sure you're not sending mixed messages. For employee handbook

drafting tips, see: [Lend a Helping Handbook: Employment Policies Worthy of Your Mission](#).

- **Tell your poor performers “why.”** No one likes to be reprimanded, demoted or dismissed. What makes these actions worse is when the reasons are unclear. If you can’t describe, in one or two plainly worded sentences, the reasons for imposing employee discipline, then you’re not ready to impose it. For help avoiding a “bad goodbye,” see: [Happy Endings](#).
- **Seek input but don’t promise a rose garden or a pure democracy.** There are times when nonprofit leaders must make unpopular decisions. And sometimes these decisions counter the consensus view. Explain to your team the reasons behind your decision, express gratitude for their input, and request their continued support.
- **Enable employees to reconnect to your mission.** Why might some techies feel undervalued despite impressive benefits and pay? Are many of them focused on repetitive tasks that offer little evidence of impact? Do they work ‘nose to the grind’ without celebrating milestones or looking into the bright future? Do they have little opportunity to collaborate and advance shared goals? “People want to work for companies where they feel that they’re making a meaningful difference in the world,” said Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a Harvard Business School researcher featured in the Fast Company article, [5 Things People Who Love Their Jobs Have In Common](#). Similarly, most nonprofit leaders would agree that many individuals pursue nonprofit work in order to support missions they believe in, and to feel connected by making positive impacts in their communities. Even with the sweetest benefits package imaginable, over time an employee may lose passion and motivation if he or she feels disconnected from the mission. Remind your employees regularly how their daily work supports the ultimate goal. Personal fulfillment at work might beat all the other benefits you could offer.
- **Cultivate a learning culture.** Do you ever feel bored or get sick of doing the same tasks and projects at work? Learning is a key element that many employees seek at work, and continual learning may allow employees to remain satisfied at work over time. Many nonprofits may lack promotional opportunities or clear career paths for their employees, but we can all offer training and development. Whether it’s learning a new skill from a colleague, being mentored by a nonprofit leader or board member, or being given additional responsibilities and new projects, every employee wants to learn and grow. Even if you can’t offer a monetary promotion, demonstrate your appreciation for employees who love learning on the job by updating their job descriptions, or by offering perks and recognition when you can.

Like the tech industry examples cited in “The other side of paradise,” nonprofit organizations offer “dreams of reinventing the world...” But unlike tech companies—where snazzy benefits are often golden handcuffs that make work-life balance feel impossible—nonprofits should be workplaces envied by other employers and employees alike.

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