

Staff Training: Neglected Element of the Risk Management Equation



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Nonprofit leaders are quick to rank staff training as an important goal in the workplace. During discussions with funders and other external stakeholders many managers tout the commitment of their organizations to provide inservice training to paid and volunteer personnel. Yet the commitment to training may waiver when grant dollars or fees for services are on a downhill slope.

Designing Your Training

The questions below were created to guide you through the process of designing training for your organization.

- What are your organization's usual practices for staff training? Many organizations have ongoing staff training programs. Your risk management training should be incorporated into other existing organizational training practices.
- Who will do the training? Selection of instructors will influence the nature of your training program. Training might be delivered by a staff member, outside consultant, or in some cases a law enforcement officer or other government official (e.g., child protective services worker).
- How will the training be delivered? Will individuals undertake training individually or in a group session? Must participants gather in a single location or can they be trained from remote locations? A growing number of organizations are choosing online and video-based training programs to ensure consistency of content and lower costs. Keep in mind that if training costs are prohibitive to the nonprofit the risk of untrained staff increases; some staff may not be trained as dollars run out to continue a costly training program.
- When will the training be provided? Your organization may begin training staff in child abuse prevention before applicants are placed. One national mentoring organization conducts program orientation sessions for applicants. The orientation stresses the organization's position on child abuse, thereby setting a tone for subsequent training and perhaps inducing potential abusers to withdraw their applications. Always consider the audience when scheduling training—if your volunteers are busy professionals, consider how you can offer meaningful training without taxing their busy schedules.
- How will training be evaluated and documented? When your staff is trained, how will you measure the fulfillment of the training objectives? Good training includes oral, written, or performance tests at the end to measure the trainees' retention of knowledge and ability to perform the skills they were taught. Your

organization may need to maintain training records that document participation in training and post-training test results.

Training a nonprofit's staff is a good idea. A training program provides an opportunity to build an effective service delivery team whose members fully understand the organization's vision and goals. Yet training is rarely given its due when the topic of risk management is discussed. Nonprofit leaders continue to be myopic on this issue, better able to focus on the closeup, one-shot issue of staff screening, rather than the long-term and safety-related benefits of effective global staff training. The view that rigorous screening "keeps bad people out" continues to pervade conversations about essential risk management strategies in nonprofits serving vulnerable clientele.

As consultants, the Nonprofit Risk Management Center's staff have an opportunity to work with nonprofits in both pre-incident and post-incident situations. Nonprofits that seek our help on a pre-incident basis imagine the possibility of harm or loss and seek advice on reducing the chance of unpleasant or "bad" surprises. Nonprofits that reach out to us in the wake of an incident desire help understanding what happened and how similar events can be avoided. During the past 10 years it is difficult to recall a post-incident assignment where an ineffective screening process was the culprit. Yet it is easy to recall client experiences where mistakes were made and harm occurred because a staff member did not know what to do, or did not understand the nonprofit's vital policies. With hindsight the leaders of organizations that have suffered serious losses can readily see the value of training and the cost of a minimalist approach. Lack of adequate training is often at the heart of the most tragic and costly cases.

Training goals for a nonprofit should, at a minimum, include a commitment to provide:

- A thorough orientation to the nonprofit's policies and procedures, with special emphasis on those designed to protect the health and safety of the nonprofit's service recipients, caregivers (paid and volunteer staff) and the mission and reputation of the organization itself;
- In-service training on general topics related to the safe delivery of specific programs and activities, and insight on the nonprofit's clientele.

Essential Topics for Risk Management Training

The failure to provide appropriate training can lead to a range of undesired outcomes, such as the failure to recognize a medical emergency and call for help; a staff member's inappropriate, excessively rough reaction to normal behavior by a client; and an automobile accident involving a staff member who was unfamiliar with the handling of a rented van. Sometimes these risks materialize when a nonprofit has neglected to provide specific training around core risk management topics. These topics include:

A Closer Look at Site-Based Versus Online Training

In-Person Training

Pros

- Opportunity to pose questions to the trainer
- Networking with others
- Ability to focus on training topic (away from distractions at the office)
- Easy to customize presentation to the audience — both in advance and on the spot

Cons

- Cost — per person cost may be out of reach for many nonprofits or necessitate limiting training program to short list of topics and/or small percentage of personnel
- Time-away from the office and other pressing matters
- Time wasted on other participants' questions

Online Training

Pros

- Convenient — courses available at a time convenient to the trainee
- Immediate — test scoring and feedback is instantaneous
- Affordable — average cost is generally far less than on-site training
- No Lost Opportunity Costs — no lost work time traveling to and from the training site

Cons

- Impersonal
- Most programs offer limited or no networking opportunities
- Accommodates one learning style
- **Emergency Response** — Staff who don't know what to do (who to call, what to say and what not to say, and how to behave) in an emergency. Remember that how the nonprofit's personnel behave towards an injured client or guest may determine whether the nonprofit is sued. At a recent workshop for leaders of university-based nonprofits, a participant told me that she was motivated to sue a driver who rear-ended her because the driver "was unkind to me after the accident." A clear understanding of accident protocols is vital to protecting the reputation and assets of the nonprofit. And this training should not be limited to senior staff — any staff member who might be present in an emergency should be up-to-date on the nonprofit's policies.
- **Clients / Service Recipients** — The public expects organizations offering services to vulnerable clients to have more than a basic understanding of their target population. This understanding includes expected physical and mental development and the needs that clients of the targeted group have. The longer a staff member works with a particular client group (e.g., elderly participants in an adult daycare program or teens living in a group home), the more familiar that staff member will become with expected or "normal" behaviors of the client group. Yet nonprofit organizations cannot rely on this understanding to build over time, but must commit to training personnel about the clients they will be serving.
- **Staff-Client Relationships** — Claims involving otherwise effective nonprofits have revealed the failure to adequately communicate the explicit prohibition against sexual relationships between caregivers and service recipients. Some leaders believe that such a prohibition is common sense and therefore does not require an emphasis during staff training. The number of suits and substantial settlements stemming from these inappropriate relationships provide compelling evidence to the contrary. Staff training programs must make clear the nonprofit's rules about proper and improper relationships and emphasize the strict enforcement of these policies.
- **Driving** — Nonprofits that own large fleets of vehicles or those for whom driving is at the heart of the organization's service model (e.g., meal delivery services) generally recognize the need to provide driver training. Other nonprofits may not fully appreciate the risks associated with staff running errands, transporting clients, and the occasional rental of a large van to carry people and materials. Automobile claims are among the most common filed against nonprofits. Many claims where the nonprofit driver is responsible reveal the failure of the nonprofit to provide training in the safe operation of the vehicle or other related issues, such as properly assisting passengers enter and exit the vehicle.
- **Employment Practices** — The distribution of a voluminous Employee Handbook or Volunteer Manual is not the same as a training program on legal and appropriate employment practices. When training staff in this area, many nonprofits continue to emphasize the pre-employment phase of the process — such as focusing on permissible and impermissible questions during applicant interviews. What is often lacking is clear direction to supervisory personnel about issues related to the termination of the employment relationship. A nonprofit's policy concerning performance counseling or the requirement that outside counsel be consulted are of little use if supervisors are permitted to terminate employees "on the spot" or take other actions that unnecessarily expose the nonprofit to claims and potential liability.

Summary

Effective staff training is an essential component of a risk management program. A comprehensive set of policies intended to protect the safety of clients and caregivers is rendered useless unless paid and volunteer staff fully understand how the policies work. Careful screening of applicants continues to be an important piece of the risk management puzzle. But it is unwise — and unsafe — to place personnel in positions of trust and responsibility without providing the training and support they need to succeed.