

Soul Connection



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It's not unusual to hear a nonprofit employee express enthusiasm for the mission and programs of the organization. Many employees are eager to explain how the nonprofit's vision and mission drew them in. Unfortunately, too many nonprofit leaders allow the passion of dedicated staff professionals to drip out of the organization. And like the oil drip under a vintage motorcycle, you can't simply pour leaking passion and commitment back in.

This week I've been reading [*Flying Without a Net: Turning Fear of Change into Fuel for Success*](#), by Harvard Business School professor Thomas J. DeLong. In [*Flying Without a Net*](#), DeLong explores the factors and forces that create unproductive anxiety among hard-charging, high-achievement professionals. Many of the characterizations of conduct in the face of anxiety are familiar.

DeLong argues that *isolation* is one of the "big three anxieties" experienced by many driven professionals, adding that unproductive yet predictable behavior often results when a driven professional perceives they are "no longer connected to the group or organization." DeLong explains that inclusion is about a "perception of being aligned with and involved in the company's essence." The dimension of inclusion may lead a staff member to ask:

- Do I feel like I'm connected to the soul of the organization or family or team or group?
- Do I feel like I have a voice in the direction and purpose of the organization?
- Do I believe that I play a role in this community, this organization even in some small but meaningful way?

DeLong also explains that "high-need-for-achievement" professionals may look for signs that they are being left out or excluded—even when there is no intention to isolate them from the mission or movement of the organization. The perception of exclusion may have negative and even destructive consequences.

As I read about the potentially destructive course that a sense of isolation may take, I began to reflect on simple steps to prevent the staff of a nonprofit from becoming separated from the soul of the organization.

- **When in Doubt, Share** – During consulting engagements I've interviewed many experienced nonprofit managers who have expressed frustration and sometimes anger about an organizational culture that values secrecy. A common complaint begins with "You're not going to believe this, but I wasn't even told that..." Sadly, the information kept "under wraps" or obscured from view is too often information that the

frustrated manager could have used to align his or her work in support of the new activity or strategy. Instead of being able to contribute, the manager is left on the sidelines. Without recognizing it, the nonprofit has sprung a leak in commitment and wasted a precious resource. Enlightened leaders recognize that a generous approach to letting staff know “what’s going on” as well as “what might be coming...” is an inexpensive way to keep morale high and create a sense of connection to mission.

- **Make the Connection** – As nonprofits mature in size and scope, it is not unusual for the organizational chart to begin to sprout narrowly structured positions. Fewer leaders wear the “multiple hats” that are common in the start-up phase and early years of organizational life. One of the potential downside risks of specialization is distancing staff from the soul of the nonprofit—its mission and purpose. Some executives discount the importance of the connection... “As long as she’s good with numbers, it doesn’t really matter if she’s passionate about our mission.” It is the responsibility of every nonprofit executive to help staff throughout the organization feel a sense of connection to mission. You may be working in the finance department, but the fact that we are able to produce accurate, timely financial statements sends a clear and powerful message to donors and other stakeholders that we take their trust seriously. That trust is essential to advancing our mission of serving less fortunate members of the community.
- **Lift Every Voice** – While it may be noisy and discordant when the perspectives of a diverse team of professionals are voiced simultaneously, executives shortchange the organizations they lead when they encourage silent acquiescence rather spirited discussion about critical matters facing the nonprofit. Each staff member’s unique perspective, experience and opinions have value. Effective nonprofit leaders encourage their team members to “speak up” and speak the truth. Like a beautifully arranged orchestral piece, the unique tone and expression of individual instruments are essential to the overall effect. Insisting on a consensus as a first step is likely to obscure, rather than bury, discontent.

The mission of a nonprofit is often its most powerful recruiting tool, and an asset that few executives would knowingly squander. But advancing that mission—the organization’s very soul—requires more than dedicated focus on service delivery. It requires a commitment to sustaining the connection to the soul of the organization that brought high-performing professionals to the nonprofit’s doorstep in the first place.

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