Join the Culture Club

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Assuming you love your job, what is it about your nonprofit that makes it a wonderful place to work? Despite the undeniable uniqueness of nonprofits, most organizations have the following elements in common: a compelling mission, a defined leadership structure, multiple stakeholder groups and vulnerability to financial stress and strain.

Given the similar components, why do some nonprofits attract and retain the best and brightest, while others are plagued by high rates of turnover, workplace malaise, and the occasional legal claim alleging wrongful termination or illegal discrimination?

One important, but intangible quality that distinguishes the best from the not-so-good is *workplace culture*.

Hard Truths About Workplace Culture

- You can’t change the culture of a workplace overnight–no matter how sincerely you want or need to
- A nonprofit with multiple locations, distinct functions or siloed operational teams may have multiple workplace cultures
- CEOs play a critical role in fostering a positive culture and demonstrating the values they expect others to uphold
- New CEOs have a unique opportunity to change the culture from bad to better, and then eventually, from better to ideal
- Conduct or attitudes that are contrary to the desired workplace culture will, if ignored, spread throughout the organization

But the hardest truth about workplace culture is this: you can’t change or improve workplace culture by adopting a pithy “values statement,” by framing and displaying posters with motivational messages, or by announcing at your next staff training that “things are going to change around here!”

Start Talkin’ Bout an Evolution

Instead of hoping and wishing for a workplace culture revolution, resolve to evolve, coax and slowly shape the culture of your nonprofit workplace into one that is worthy of your mission. Here are a few tips to help you get started.

- **Make Your Employee Handbook Relevant**. In her article, "Lend a Helping Handbook," Erin Gloeckner describes why and how some handbooks cause more "grief than good." One common reason is irrelevance. Erin writes, "Handbook content should have meaning; it should only reference policies that you sincerely expect your employees to follow, and that are actually enforceable. …if it is irrelevant to your workplace culture and expectations, then take it out of your handbook!"
- **Practice Inward Goodwill**. Nonprofit organizations capably spread cheer and goodwill to the vast communities they serve. But too often that goodwill is only outwardly focused. In "Lend a Helping Handbook," Erin explains that "goodwill" is a quality that inspires employees to read and follow the policies in an employee handbook. She writes: "The handbook is an essential resource for employees–one that demonstrates that the employer is approaching employment issues in a thoughtful way… Take time to create a handbook that… makes employees feel more confident–more confident in their own abilities, and more confident that you have sincere goodwill toward them."
- **Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say**. When workplace culture is weak, employees and managers fear speaking the truth. Whether it's fear of reprisal for critical comments, or a sense that managers are inflexible and uninterested in contrary points of view, a culture of silence is potentially poisonous to your mission. How? A culture of silence can erode the potent idealism that all nonprofit employees bring to their jobs. To inspire a culture of accountability, where each employee does what they promise to do, contrary views must be encouraged and celebrated. Teach everyone on your team to disagree without being disagreeable.
- **Align and Refine**. An important step in evolving workplace culture is aligning what you say you do with what *you actually do*. For example, if your nonprofit needs staff to be present and available at the office during business hours, stop trying to lure new recruits by promising unlimited flextime. Great leaders are also willing to admit their own mistakes and fumbles. Resolve to inspire conduct that truly reflects the high-performing, high-integrity organization portrayed in your grant proposals and fundraising materials.
- **Take a Stand**. Kudos to the new CEO who recently told his staff that unlimited, unplanned telecommuting was ending, effective immediately. His predecessor allowed any and all staff to work at home as they saw fit–regardless of the negative impact on client service or teamwork. Although the new CEO's decision rendered him a bit unpopular, his "stand" was what the nonprofit's mission needed.

For additional insights on workplace culture, see:

- The Goldilocks Principle: Creating a Culture That's Just Right, *Risk Management Essentials*
- Command and Control = A Toxic Organization Culture, by Warren Quinn

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