

People — Your Most Pivotal Resource



By George L. Head, Ph.D.

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Three large groups of people are essential to your nonprofit's success in pursuing its mission:

1. Your staff (including your officers, employees, and volunteers) who jointly perform all the planning, speaking, driving, carrying, cooking, cleaning, negotiating, decision-making, and all the other activities that we tend somewhat loosely to say your nonprofit "does."
2. Your clients, service recipients, consumers, participants and members — all of the people whom your mission seeks directly or indirectly to serve.
3. The wider community with which your nonprofit interacts — all the individuals and people in organizations who (among other things) contribute to your nonprofit's finances and reputation; provide you with (or buy your) goods and services; enact, enforce, or protect your nonprofit from general laws and specific regulations; and the neighbors who own, occupy, or work in the properties that are near each of your nonprofit's facilities.

The individuals in each of these groups are critical to your nonprofit's progress; yet our title specifically describes them as "pivotal," not "crucial." *Pivotal* is the right word here because the success of your nonprofit often *turns* on events involving people in each of these three groups and on how they, in turn, respond to these events. Given some sets of events, your staff, clients, and the surrounding community are assets that boost your revenues and your success wondrously. But if other circumstances prevail, these same staff, clients, and the wider community generate liabilities that doom your nonprofit to years of struggle, if not outright failure. So much turns on these people, your pivotal resource.

The importance of people to a nonprofit's success has prompted the Nonprofit Risk Management Center to develop and offer through the Center's Website, a very thorough [toolkit on workplace safety](#). The toolkit is titled: *Workplace Safety Is No Accident — An Employer's Online Toolkit to Protect Employees and Volunteers*. The toolkit offers an opportunity for leaders and managers of nonprofits and public entities to learn how to identify, combat, and if necessary recover from a full range of hazards that may bring injury, disease, or other harm (such as stress, harassment, and identity theft) to a nonprofit's paid and volunteer staff.

Our purpose here is not to simply praise the *Toolkit*. Rather, the following paragraphs aim to view workplace safety in a wider risk management context. Our focus will still be on people and workplace safety, but we will look at how workplace safety affects — for better or worse — all three of the major groups of people (staff, clients, and the wider community) who are pivotal to a nonprofit's success. For this wider focus, we will assume first that workplace safety is poor (that your organization ignores the *Workplace Safety Toolkit*), then assume

that workplace safety improves due, at least in part, to your use of the *Toolkit*. We know that workplace safety affects insurance costs — workers compensation rates for employees and general liability rates for volunteers and officers — but we are ignoring these costs here to concentrate especially on the more direct, and quite diverse, effects of workplace safety on the three groups of people on whom nonprofits most depend.

If your workplace safety is substandard, your own staff's productivity suffers because:

- Some of your employees and volunteers are absent with injuries or diseases your organization caused.
- Your remaining employees and volunteers are stretched thin trying to do unfamiliar tasks to fill in for those who are absent.
- Your managers (perhaps even some of your officers) may become distracted from their normal work in trying to cope with work safety issues — especially if claimants' attorneys and insurance adjusters start visiting your facilities or the media begins coming to your door.
- When (not *if*, but *when*) word gets out — fairly or unfairly — that people "often" get injured or become ill working for your organization, some of your staff will begin looking for safer work, and replacements will be harder to recruit.

Unsafe workplace conditions also have adverse effects on clients — clients who are likely to seek other sources of service and to discourage new clients from coming to you. You are likely to lose these present and potential clients when:

- Clients who now routinely come to your facility for recreation, food, clothing, social contacts, education, medicine, therapy, or other mission-related reasons are injured or sickened by the same dangerous conditions (such as slippery floors, toxic substances, parking lot hazards, or radiation) that are disabling your staff.
- Clients who have come to value or to depend on their direct relationship with a particular staff member of your organization — even if they have never been to your premises — are likely to stray away, or to begin looking for another service organization, when "their person" at your organization becomes disabled for an extended period and, in their view, is not adequately replaced.
- Clients just simply stop coming, without saying a word or asking any questions, when they hear rumors or media reports that people who go to your organization's facilities "get hurt a lot."

The third key group whose support for your organization may well turn to hostility because of your substandard workplace safety is the wider community with which your nonprofit interacts daily. A poor work-safety record will, in all probability, affect what your immediate neighbors see — and what the wider community hears — that affects their opinion of your organization. If your work-safety record is sub par, most of what they see, hear, and think will be bad — and your mission will suffer. For example:

- The people who occupy or regularly work in or visit properties near yours will have amazingly sharp eyes for spotting any ambulances, fire engines, pest-control trucks, toxic-decontamination equipment, public health officials, and similar "trouble" vehicles at your facilities; these "good neighbors" are likely to wonder if they also are in trouble and, just to be safe, to warn their neighbors and perhaps alert the media.
- Both regular and potential donors to your nonprofit, individuals and organizations that feel obligated to make socially responsible decisions about the organizations they support may have twinges of doubt when writing out a check for your organization. Perhaps another organization that "cares more about the people who work for it, or at least one that uses our money for something better than paying higher insurance premiums" would be a worthier recipient.
- People you ask to serve on your board may hesitate to lend their good names to an organization like yours if it is developing a reputation for work-safety deficiencies, deficiencies that — if they became really severe — might spawn civil lawsuits or criminal proceedings against your organization and the board itself.

Each of these bulleted threats to the three major groups of people who power your organization is a pivot point — on one side a threat where poor work safety can endanger your mission by depriving you of the people or of the people's support that you so very much need. But these pivot points also mark opportunities, situations where excellent work-safety performance can enhance the value that your staff, your clients, and the wider community provide to your organization. As just a few examples:

- Employees and volunteers who are confident they are not in danger are more likely to seek ways of becoming more efficient in their work — and to encourage outsiders they know are good workers to join

their “team” — rather than just trying to “keep safe and survive” on the job.

- The clients that your organization helps reach their own goals, thus fulfilling your organization’s mission as it applies to their own lives — are more eager to “graduate” to your staff as a volunteer or even an employee if they see in your “safety-focused” management that you care as much about your staff as you do about your clients.
- The people in the communities with whom you interact — your actual neighbors, those who give you money, those who regulate you, even those who may sometimes consider suing you for some supposed wrong against them — will think just a bit more highly of your organization and of your cause if your workplace safety record is strong. And those people, organizations, or authorities who think of you “just a bit more highly” than they think of some other nonprofit may — on a day or in a way you would never have guessed — be the ones who push you over the top to mission success.

So be sure to get on the positive side of these pivot points. Consult [Workplace Safety Is No Accident](#) and peruse the valuable information, resources and insights it offers.

George Head is special advisor to the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

Dr. Head welcomes your comments and feedback on the issue of workplace safety or any risk management topic or dilemma facing your nonprofit.