

A Strategic look at shifting work culture toward mission

By: Suzanne V. Benoit, LCSW

I have been involved in a number of projects recently focused on shifting their work culture to encourage increased service quality and employee satisfaction. This transition can be difficult for older organizations as long-service employees struggle to adjust to the changes necessary for nonprofit survival.

Evaluate your current work culture

Your work culture is the combination of the actual values and philosophies used by staff in the conduct of their work, service quality, and the nature of employee relations. Are your employees pulling together toward mission achievement, service quality and professional respect for clients and coworkers? If you have employee “camps” in which longer service staff complain about the work approach of new hires or if new staff are complaining about those who just want to keep doing things the way they have “always been done,” you may want to look at workplace culture. It may be worth considering a direct intervention to create the unified culture needed to increase organizational effectiveness.

Factors affecting work culture

Nonprofit work culture is affected by a number of factors – among them:

- Number of operating years
- Degree of difference between stated values and actual values used by staff in their work
- The degree and nature of team work
- The degree and nature of staff communication
- The degree of supervisory leadership skill
- Staff turnover or lack of turnover
- How successfully you have hired staff who are in sync with the stated values and philosophy
- The way you resolve employee disagreements

Culture improvement project

Improving work culture is not necessarily a “project” per say with a beginning, middle and end. It is more a question of an overall approach to work and staying true to improving several factors over time. A place

to start is to bring together a representative group of employees across levels and programs, including those who are relatively in touch with what really goes on inside the organization. Have the group brainstorm the cultural factors present that you feel positively contribute to service quality and then list the cultural factors present that detract from service quality. You might begin by addressing the negative factors.

Ten strategies to improve work culture

Over the years, I have identified a number of factors that taken together, greatly influence work culture. No nonprofit uses all of these strategies perfectly but if you implement some of them very well and the rest in some modest fashion, you are guaranteed to see a positive shift in service quality and employee satisfaction:

1. Organizational mission and values are well-understood by all staff and translated by leadership every day in the conduct of work.
2. Program outcomes are defined, measured and reported.
3. Candidates for employment are screened for both technical qualifications and preferred values and philosophies.
4. New staff are fully oriented to agency values and practices.
5. Agency policies are well understood and followed.
6. The organization uses a variety of communication mechanisms: team meetings, email, interoffice mail, to ensure that staff are on the same page in a timely manner.
7. Staff are held accountable - evaluated based on observation and feedback from staff.
8. All employees receive one- to-one supervision.
9. Professional boundaries are observed with clients and among staff.
10. Comprehensive confidentiality is maintained regarding organization material, client information, and personnel information.