

Add a Personal Touch to Nonprofit Recruitment and Retention by Lindsay Edmonds Wickman

In the nonprofit sector, a motivational strategy can be just as crucial to attracting and retaining talent as providing a competitive compensation and benefits package. As a result, the mission of the nonprofit has to be clearly aligned with the culture so employees stay intrinsically motivated.

"There needs to be real alignment between how people are treated internally and what your mission, your vision and your objectives are for people outside of the organization," said Chris Musselwhite, president and CEO of Discovery Learning Inc., which provides executive education and organizational leadership development products.

If employees are disenchanted and lack motivation, the results can be especially damaging for a nonprofit.

"You put your values out there because it's clear what you're about and what your mission is," Musselwhite said. "When the culture of your organization is inconsistent or doesn't match those values, it becomes a lot more obvious to people and a lot more damaging. It create more discontent than it might in the for-profit sector where the clearly stated purpose may be to make money."

For cash and resource strapped nonprofit organizations it is even more important to create an interactive environment in which employees feel recognized and appreciated.

To do this, Musselwhite said managers should take time to acknowledge employees for what is working. Regular meetings should be scheduled so employees can give reports on their successes. These meetings also provide a forum for employees to clarify what's not working and to solicit feedback or potential solutions from peers and leaders. To be successful, though, this behavior must be modeled from the top down.

"It has to start at the top of the organization, and it has to become part of the culture," Musselwhite said. "Typically, a mid-level manager is not going to manage his or her employees in a really effective way when [the mid-level manager is] being managed ineffectively."

Creating a culture of motivation also should actively encourage managers to provide their employees with development opportunities. One way to do this is through targeted projects. When assigning a project, managers should clearly communicate the desired end result and the parameters in which employees must work, Musselwhite said. Then employees can decide how they're going to achieve the end result. In doing this, managers are giving employees the independence to develop their own solutions.

Some nonprofits understand how to motivate employees better than others, just like in the for-profit sector. However, the nonprofit organization is more likely to keep its talent by leveraging engagement or motivation and rewards-based performance management strategies than the for-profit company, where tangible compensation often plays a larger role in work or career considerations.

"The smart [organizations] are learning, especially with knowledge employees, that if they want to keep them, they're going to have to do [this]," Musselwhite said. "When people leave their jobs, the No. 1 reason they report leaving is not because they got more money somewhere else - it's because they didn't like their manager. If I come along and offer you a little bit more money and you're miserable, you're probably going to go. But if you're really happy, I'm not sure offering you a little bit more money is going to be enough to pull you away."

To ensure employees stay intrinsically motivated, nonprofits should cultivate effective and inspiring leaders who invest in their teams. Musselwhite said something as simple as taking time to get to know employees on a personal level will build trust and provide insight into what motivates them.

"Especially with employees that have options and are in demand, you're going to have to create a work environment that meets the intrinsic needs, [where] they feel like they're not just a cog in a wheel - they're getting opportunities to advance, and they're recognized when they do well," he said.

[About the Author: Lindsay Edmonds Wickman is an associate editor for Talent Management magazine.]

