

OPINION

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# Doing Good Requires Happier, Healthier Workers

By Beth Kanter and Aliza Sherman

At the United Way in Sioux Falls, S.D., a bell rings every workday at 10 and at 2. That's the signal that it's time for everyone to escape their desks and walk a mile together. For 15 years, employees have taken these 15-minute walks — outside in a nearby park in nice weather or in United Way's building complex in bad weather.

This simple pause in the workday has produced many benefits — improving health, reducing stress, and helping workers become stronger colleagues and friends.

Though other nonprofits are now starting walking meetings and adopting numerous other creative, low-budget ideas to encourage employees to practice self-care and create a culture of well-being in the nonprofit workplace, there's still lots more to be done to change the pressure-cooker atmosphere that is so common at many nonprofits.

It's time to admit that we have no choice but to change the entrenched nonprofit culture of scarcity and sacrifice if we expect to solve the problems our donors, clients, and others want us to. We could all do better in changing the world if our workplaces were happier and healthier. We wouldn't face the frequent turnover that causes us to lose institutional memory, and we would more easily attract top talent in the competition with business and government.

It's not such a stretch for most nonprofit workers to play a nurturing role. They do it all the time with donors, clients, board members, policy makers, and others. But too rarely do they apply that same care and attention to their employees. A nonprofit's work may be mission-driven, but a happy, healthy staff is mission critical.

In fact, nonprofit culture celebrates the opposite. Nonprofit leaders, especially those who are involved in social-change movements, are often put on a pedestal for giving up everything, even their health and well-being, for the cause. They work long hours, neglect their personal lives,

ignore their physical and mental health, and even keep themselves from experiencing joy because of the emotionally tough work they're doing.

Self-sacrifice becomes a cultural norm in organizations and movements. Leaders who give up their personal lives for the cause often evaluate staff members' value or commitment to the organization by how much they, too, deny themselves work-life separation and boundaries.

The dangers of this approach have not gone unnoticed by the nonprofit work force.

"We are going to kill ourselves trying to change the world," says Brian Reich, director of the Hive, a special projects unit of USA for UNHCR. "That's no good for anyone. Our work is hard, slow, messy, and stressful. We need to take care of ourselves if we expect to be successful."

## **Sources of Stress**

Changing this mind-set takes collective action by many players. Let's start with a big source of the stress: donors.

Foundations and other wealthy donors must pay attention to the way their actions cause unnecessary anxiety. They can also identify toxic elements in the nonprofit workplace that, left unchecked, could wreak havoc on organizations and social-change movements.

Another source of stress comes from boards.

A nonprofit's board of directors has a fiduciary responsibility for the nonprofit and its mission.

To succeed with culture change over the long term, board members must ensure that their employees are taking care of themselves. Yet too many times the board's leadership compounds the pressure in the organization.

In nonprofit after nonprofit, everything (including sleep) comes to a halt for days as workers prepare for board meetings. Says one executive director, "In our organization, we try to maintain work balance, but every quarter before a board meeting, the entire staff is paralyzed preparing for the meeting. You can feel the fear."

That stress can take its toll on people's physical health and make them sick. Joan Garry, a former nonprofit leader, recalls a development director who brought a heart monitor to work due to stress of preparing for a board meeting. As the organization's leader, Ms. Garry admits that she should have told her development director to go home and rest, but instead she and everyone else kept prepping for the meeting.

Suzanne Allen, CEO of Philanthropy Ohio, decided to make a focus on employee well-being part of the strategic-planning process for her organization. By doing so, she involved her board in the discussions from the start. She asked her trustees to consider this tactic: ensuring that all staff members have the energy and appropriate professional development so they can perform well and will stay at the organization for a long time.

"It was a tough sell. They felt that 'ensuring energy' was a bit vague because people come to work to work," admits Ms. Allen. "As a relatively new leader of an organization, I've learned that this is the only thing I really can do for my staff. To create a culture that rewards ulcers is not creative and not sustainable. My leadership team and I shared with our staff — and with the board — that this is important to us, and [staff] professional and personal development plans should reflect the desire we all have for their continued growth and renewal."

What's more important is that nonprofit boards put an emphasis on selecting leaders who will put their focus on ways to help their employees balance work and life demands and create supportive cultures. They also need to pay for training to help more CEOs learn these skills. Boards should reward leaders (and staff) with paid sabbaticals before they burn out, not as crisis triage after burnout occurs.

## **Good Balance**

In a recent study, one third of nonprofit leaders identified balancing personal life and work as a skill they needed to develop.

That's a staggering number — and it's why nonprofits need to adopt leadership-development programs that educate and encourage nonprofit leaders to become role models for balancing work and life for staff.

Take, for example, Issue One, a nonprofit that not only has a people-first culture and well-being policies but an executive director who is a role model for stepping away to refresh — and actively encourages staff members to use their vacation time, be home with their families when needed, and even block off time on the calendar for reflection time or 'stare at the wall' and let the creative process unfold."

Developing more people-focused leaders can help transform toxic nonprofit cultures and greatly reduce organizationwide passion fatigue and burnout. When nonprofit leaders take time for leadership development and sabbatical programs to replenish their energy, they come back refreshed, and that benefits the organization.

Getting donors, board members, and leaders to change their ways is no small undertaking. But there's still more we need to do to change nonprofit cultures to focus on ways workers can support one another.

GlobalGiving faced that challenge after it held a staff workshop to outline the organization's key values. Their values included: "always open; never settle; committed to wow; and listen, act, learn, repeat." It was not long before the group's values — like never settle — made staff members feel stretched and conflicted about their work-life balance. Staff members hit a crisis point, according to Alison Carlman, director of marketing and communications.

"Our executive team heard what the staff was saying, and they allocated time and funding for us to design our own process for identifying our challenges and recommending solutions," she recalls.

## **Better Attitudes**

As we have studied the most successful work cultures, we have learned a few key steps that every organization can take to improve employee outlook and attitudes.

**Promote awareness.** Inform everyone within your organization about the issue of stress and burnout and the importance of taking steps that are not just about improving physical health but also bringing more energy and vitality into all aspects of life. Share the science from credible sources to back up the information you provide.

**Help decision makers understand the benefits of investing in a happy, healthy culture.** Remind them that this will reduce health costs and lead to major boosts in productivity, as well as improving the ability to attract top employees and keep them for years and years.

**Encourage learning.** Create the space and time for assessment and education for employees and help them develop their own customized self-care plans based on the results of their individual assessments. Bring in experts to provide workshops, lunch-and-learn sessions, brainstorming sessions, interactive retreats, and webinars on self-care topics. Offer short-term sessions that teach stress-management techniques like meditation or yoga that can have long-term effects. Make sure the nonprofit's leaders take part in these activities to encourage wider participation.

**Get leadership buy-in.** If you're on the staff, you might start by getting your executive director on board. If you're the executive director, this means getting board buy-in but also getting buy-in from the staff. Prepare a presentation for your board that focuses on benefits including increased productivity, better employee morale, and stronger staff retention.

**Identify in-house champions.** There are people within your organization who are already taking the steps you want others to emulate. They'll help uncover others who can advocate and serve as role models.

**Establish an employee engagement committee.** Assemble a formal standing committee of employees who will serve as your advisers on what well-being programs and activities to design, test, launch, and improve.

**Get feedback and gauge needs.** Your employee committee should spearhead an internal effort to gather feedback — anonymously, if necessary — from staff members. They can learn about employee feelings and attitudes toward their well-being and how they perceive the organization's impact on their well-being.

**Identify outside resources.** Your health-care provider and other community businesses and organizations may have excellent and inexpensive sources of help for your nonprofit.

**Establish your budget.** Your organization can work creatively with partners, your health-insurance vendor, and community organizations to devise — and even barter for — affordable activities and programs.

**Track results.** Create a well-being dashboard that is accessible to your board, director, staff members, volunteers, and donors. It is easy to get obsessed with the numbers or to feel that only numbers can properly express the return on investment of a healthier culture. But it is wise to broaden your focus to acknowledge life-changing and life-saving results, enhanced work quality and work environment, and overall improved quality of life that your activities have produced.

Transforming our nonprofits into happier and healthier places is not easy, but creating a never-ending well of vibrant and self-sustaining, energy, passion, and excitement among all workers will help your organization achieve greater impact — and do it without the burnout that so often marks today's unnecessarily overstressed nonprofit work force.

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