

CONNECTIONS

~ a quarterly newsletter from Careers In Nonprofits ~

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3 SECRETS TO RETAINING GREAT STAFF



Staff retention is a critical and timely issue for nonprofits and associations. Why? Well, let's just say the reasons are many!

Great staff members contribute not only to operational stability and continuity, but also to the institutional knowledge and mission of an organization. That said, the loss of a key staff member, whether an Executive Director or an Executive Assistant, can interrupt an established system for months on end. And with the economy on everyone's mind, now is a good time to consider how *one open position* can affect not only the politics but also the pocketbook of an organization.

That's right: losing and replacing a staff member can be very disruptive!

When a person you rely on leaves, his or her responsibilities stay behind, and someone—existing staff or a temporary replacement—has to pick up the slack. Valuable time and energy, and therefore dollars, shift from other priorities to the open position. A replacement search, whether in-house or through an outside firm, takes additional hours and people-power. Not to mention, expenses may accumulate after a successful search, including relocation, orientation, and training.

Whew! That's the bad news. Now let's talk about what your organization can do to *avoid* this scenario.

Born from our many years of experience with nonprofit organizations and associations, here are three indispensable secrets to retaining great staff:

1) Retention starts with recruiting. Forgive us for stating the obvious, but in order to retain a great staff, you must first *build* a great staff! But the recruiting-retention dynamic goes even deeper. The goal is twofold: to build a qualified staff that suits your organization's mission and culture *and* feels a sense of fulfillment and loyalty at work. To accomplish this lofty goal, your recruiting process must include the following two components:

First, a clear understanding of what you are looking for in an open position and potential employee.

And second, the ability (and willingness) to communicate an honest and straightforward picture of the organization.

These two essentials should drive every hiring decision you make. The best way to begin the process is to develop an accurate job description. Take the time to outline the responsibilities of the position and the qualifications you are seeking. Using that description as a guide, advertise to the right audience. As resumes come in, allow the recruiting process to do its job: eliminating unqualified candidates and identifying those with potential for in-person interviews. Already, you are saving valuable time and money!



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**A Conversation with Karen Cleveland,
President and CEO of Habitat for
Humanity of Northern Virginia**

NEWS YOU CAN USE

[Click here](#) for the Nonprofit Retention and Vacancy Report from Opportunity Knocks

[Click here](#) for strategic staffing ideas from Taleo Research

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to *Connections*, a quarterly newsletter from Careers In Nonprofits designed to keep you informed about nonprofit industry news. We would love to hear from you regarding ideas, topics of interest, and general feedback. Also, let us know if you would like to be a featured client in a future newsletter. We value your input and look forward to continued successes in our work together!

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As you proceed to interviews, be sure to discuss what candidates are looking for in the position as well as their background and qualifications. Now is the time to clarify questions about the job description and look for shared expectations. Initiate a frank conversation about the organization's culture and identity and the management style of the position's immediate supervisor. Take inventory after each interview, paying attention to the soft skills displayed, and soberly evaluate candidates according to their potential for long-term employment with your organization.

Of course, there is no way to guarantee a successful working relationship with new hires, but following these steps puts you in a much better position to make informed decisions and build a top-notch, long-tenured staff.

2) Market value matters. No matter how mission-focused your star staff member may be, money still talks. A higher offer from another organization can spell bad news for you.

It's a common practice to pay attention to market value at the time of hire and a common mistake to ignore it from that point forward. A better practice: do the research! Know the market value of your high-performing staff members—be they directors, associates, or admins—and pay accordingly. If they are performing above and beyond their current responsibilities or salary, give them a promotion or a raise—or someone else will.

While it's true that nonprofits and associations may not be able to compete with for-profit salaries, it's also true that more nonprofit employees leave their organizations for other nonprofits than for corporate jobs. Take advantage of annual surveys such as the [2009 Non-profit Salary and Benefits Survey](#) from the Management Association of Illinois to stay abreast of salary packages for comparable positions at comparable organizations. If it is simply not possible to match the market, consider other ways to pay your staff, such as vacation time, continuing education, conferences, and other perks. Staff members who know they are valued are more likely to stay.

3) Open communication speaks volumes. Why is it that we wait until exit interviews to ask staff members what they liked and didn't like about their job, what problems they encountered, and what we could have done to make it better? What might happen if we took a more proactive approach, especially with staff members we can't imagine functioning without? It's common knowledge that employees often leave due to their relationship with an immediate supervisor. When strong staff members do not sense an open line of communication with their managers, they feel stunted and may begin looking elsewhere for a place where they can reach their full potential. This doesn't necessarily mean the manager is doing something wrong, but perhaps there is more he or she could do *right*.

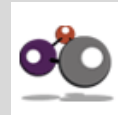


Open communication must begin with your management staff, but it's not something everyone knows how to do automatically. Two words: management training. As a routine practice with in-house workshops and speakers, it's a smart investment on the part of your organization, bound to pay dividends not only in retention but also in overall morale. Even your best leaders will benefit from management training, and they'll appreciate the opportunity for continuing education.

If you aren't already doing regular staff evaluations (quarterly, biannual, or annual), start now! Performance evaluations offer an important opportunity for supervisors and their staff to review progress, voice affirmations and concerns, and set goals. The questions typically asked at an exit interview are perfectly appropriate in an evaluation. *What do you love about your job/this organization? What would tempt you to leave for another opportunity? How can we make your work here an even better fit?* Take advantage of this natural setting, and talk to your star performers about job satisfaction. Rather than being afraid of the answers you may hear, *use them!* Make the changes necessary to show your prized staff members that *you are listening* and you want to keep them happy and challenged in their work.

As we always say, *your staff is your most valuable asset*. Retaining great staff is important, therefore, not only to your *business*, but also to your *budget*. While there is no sure-fire way to keep all of your best people in place, the practices outlined above will certainly help you to make forward strides in hiring, valuing, and communicating with staff across the board.

CAREERS IN NONPROFITS



Careers In Nonprofits is a full-service staffing firm serving associations and nonprofit organizations in Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC. We are the nonprofit staffing experts, providing a winning process for temporary, temp-to-perm, and permanent searches, from entry to executive level.



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A CONVERSATION WITH KAREN CLEVELAND, PRESIDENT AND CEO

Karen Cleveland is the President and CEO of [Habitat for Humanity of Northern Virginia](#) and also oversees the Habitat International Affiliate in Arlington, Virginia. She assumed her post in March of 2003, charged with building strategic partnerships and leading the organization to a new model of sustainability. Her dual strengths as a visionary and practical business leader made her the ideal person for the position.

Karen's background includes posts as Executive Vice President of the Association of Sales & Marketing Companies, Director of Programs for the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, and Executive Director of the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce. She is also a past president of the Metropolitan Council of Chambers, past chair of the YMCA of Fairfax County in Reston, and was named Reston's Citizen of the Year in 1990.

After a career in business nonprofits, Karen finds her work for a charitable organization to be very rewarding and eye opening. Beyond the parent company, the local focus of her work is an experience like no other, inspiring and full of nuance. She has been with Habitat for close to seven years now and considers it an incredible opportunity to be leading a community-based organization that is so mission focused and transformational.



Q. Has the current economic climate prompted you to be more creative in your work? If so, how?

Because of the challenges we have faced for a number of years in our specific location, we have had to be creative, developing new ways to serve low-income families in a high-cost area. The Habitat model hasn't worked here in its simplistic manner in quite some time. We went through an exercise a couple of years ago to really analyze the tasks we do by job function area and then group them in priority status. Through this exercise, we came up with a strategic staffing model we love and have even encouraged the consultant who worked with us through the process to popularize it. It helps us to know which job functions need to be staffed by people with specific skills, which jobs, though critical, could be filled by volunteers or contract workers, and what tasks could shift internally to other staff positions. It is a visual model that has been good for our board and staff. It was in my head somewhere, but since we have had it in place formally, it has helped us all to stay focused. Even in these leaner times, it still makes sense to us, so we can keep executing it.

Q. What practices have been effective for you in leading your organization through challenging financial times?

It goes back to having a foundation and really being able, as a leader, to be the visionary for the organization, seeing things on the horizon. I am more of an entrepreneur at heart. In order to be successful, however, I have learned more traditional business practices so that I can not only look on the horizon but also bring it down to a tactical level. As leaders, we have to know where we need help. I know my strengths, and I surround myself with people who have strengths that I do not have. The financial aspect is not one of my strengths, so for me, it was important to transform the finance and administration committee. I inherited a great group of people, mostly CPAs, who spent a lot of time helping with infrastructure, reports, and the like. In order to move the organization forward, however, I needed to build a committee of finance people who could help make strategic decisions and speak to the strategic direction of the organization.

In high-cost areas such as Northern Virginia, we needed to veer from the original Habitat model, which was to build a single-family house with three bedrooms and one bathroom. We are developing new models and are now building townhouses and condominium buildings. The cost to build condos is more, but there are different benefits. On one donated block from the city, Habitat DC is building 50 units in duplexes!

Q. What are some best practices you have identified for hiring/managing staff and measuring staff performance?



While individual skills are important, the two things that I find most important in hiring people for success are 1) the ability to work as part of a cross-functional team, and 2) organizational fit and culture. Working as part of a team that is truly cross-functional, as we are here, is not something everyone can do. In fact, it can be exhausting for some people. We put as much money as possible from donations directly to the mission and keep a lean organization. It can be a challenge for people who need to have a strict plan and execute on that plan. To work well here, you need to be flexible.

How candidates fit into our culture is also important. We work in a metropolitan area with low-income families, and our volunteer force is critical to reaching our goals. How we manage and utilize our volunteers and unpaid workers is really critical from a hiring standpoint, so I spend a lot of time in that area. I always have candidates go through multiple interviews and with multiple people. We are in an old church school building, and all of our doors have windows. I like to observe prospective employees with other people, not by sitting in on every interview, but by passing by and paying attention to body language. I watch respected staff members, because I really value their opinions, and I can tell by the energy whether rapport has been developed. When we hire people, we really are better able to get them involved in the organization quickly than if we had not paid such attention to fit.

Managing staff is not brain surgery. I don't have an HR or OT background, but a lot of it has to do with empowering people. I try to be transparent and work with people the way they need to be worked with. When employees are new, it's important to build rapport and relationships and to invite dialogue. I don't manage any two people exactly the same way. Sometime in the early 80s I learned the principle of "management by walking around." It is still so important. Every manager has strengths, as does every employee. If you walk around and listen to conversation—not like eavesdropping, but getting a pulse, a sense of the energy level, and asking questions—it's amazing what you'll learn about people and the rest of the organization.



Q. What would you identify as your greatest strength as a leader and how has it worked for you in the past few months?

My personal greatest strength is my ability to inspire people to action. Having said that, I do think that inspiring people to follow a vision, which is what I do in leading this organization, is a little different. I've learned that we cannot do what we do here at Habitat without literally thousands of volunteers and unpaid staff. And I make a distinction between the two. I have some people here who are volunteers, but the work they are doing for us is so critical that if they were not here, I would have to hire someone to do the work. I am strongest as a leader when I lead from the middle, when I surround myself with people to lead the mission. Being out front is not most important, but rather nurturing paid staff and volunteers to make sure they are moving with me in this mission. That is the most important role I have.

Q. What is the best piece of advice you could offer to nonprofit leaders facing similar challenges in the current economy?



If this time of crisis is the first time you ever do what I am going to say, then I would recommend making this a routine practice: really give some thought, writing or walking, to what things you should be spending your time on that are of the greatest priority and that will help your organization to survive, grow, or be healthy in this environment. And then very deliberately hand over some of the things you do to people you trust or want to help grow, particularly younger people in your organization. Younger people thrive best when you throw a ball to them and say, "Go!" Sometimes leaders find something they are good at doing and think they are the only ones who can do it. The greatest compliment you can give to a staff member is to give them your favorite thing to do. I never read horoscopes, but I happened to pick one up today and it started with this line: "There is nothing more satisfying than giving someone else an opportunity."

In the nonprofit world, you are the caretaker of your staff and organization. It's your responsibility to get the right people on the bus and get them in the right seats. That's a concept I took from Jim Collins, author of Good to Great. He also talks about leading from the middle. He wrote a separate book, another chapter of Good to Great focusing on nonprofits, because half of the calls and letters he got in response to the original were from nonprofits. Getting the right people in the right seats is important because you may come across people who just *get* your mission and hire them but find that they don't have organizational skills. You have to find the best place for them. The other big thing with nonprofits is the mission focus. It's not all about the bottom line. You have to figure out where the mission intersects with your business goals and keep your eye on that. It takes work to identify where that point is, but it's healthy and very grounding.

Q. What are some resources that have been helpful to you in your work as an Executive Director?

For everybody in the top staff position, it is important to have at least a couple of people, other executives on the outside, who you can bounce things off of. It is difficult to find the time but critical to have those people. We should also always carve out the time to at least attend one or two professional development events a year. That's where I get lists of books and websites to check out; in fact, that's where I learned of Jim Collins. Having a network, using the network, occasionally getting out of the office, and carving that time for development are all so important. And most importantly, I need to get out and talk to the community we serve. That reenergizes me and keeps me focused. Going back to school for leadership coaching, which I had the opportunity to do last year, was wonderful. Not everybody wants to or can do that, but for me it was a godsend.



Q. What book have you read recently that you would recommend to a friend, and why would you recommend it?

I have like six books on my nightstand! I am reading a novel, The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, by David Wroblewski. Another book I really loved is Find Your Great Work, by Michael Stanier. I heard him speak at a conference, and he is very generous with his resources. He has a wonderful website, www.findyourgreatwork.com, based on the book and will share all sorts of things if you register with him. It's a great tool to use as a manager or leader.

Q. What do you think your greatest challenge will be in the next six to 12 months and beyond?

Since I've been here and seen the need, my goal has been to really transform the model to a sustainable model, a partnership model. We have made huge progress. Because of the recession, our biggest challenge is to keep people's attention and find enough money to make the model work. I believe that if we can work through the next 12-18 months to make that happen, we will reach our goal and be sustainable at a whole new level.