

Case studies

Designing Human Resource Practices in Animal Rescue Organizations

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This case study puts students into a decision-making role as they examine human resource practices in small, non-profit organizations. Specifically, students are tasked with managing an animal rescue and must develop strategies to help recruit and train volunteers. Animal rescue provides a unique context given the lack of funding that most rescues experience and a heavy reliance on volunteers as traditional approaches, such as the “carrot and sticks” approach aren’t as useful in this scenario.

Introduction

Managing an organization is difficult, which newly appointed director Danielle is discovering first-hand. Danielle oversees Wagging Tails Animal Rescue, hereafter referred to as Tails, which is a small, non-profit animal welfare organization dedicated to helping place community animals into their forever homes. Like many other animal welfare organizations, the pressure is intense as Tails relies upon fatigued volunteers while operating on a limited budget (Reese, 2024). If Tails is unable to help animals within the community, they are often taken to the local, high-kill shelter where the odds of adoption are low.

Background on Nonprofits and Volunteering

Nonprofit organizations are a major sector in the United States economy with estimates placing nonprofits as the third largest workforce sector, just behind retail and manufacturing, representing approximately ten percent of the total workforce (Berenguer et al., 2024). Like many organizations in this sector, Danielle faces challenges with managing volunteers (Berenguer & Shen, 2020). Volunteers are individuals who donate their time, services, and skills to a particular organization and have no obligations and expectations of financial compensation (Laczo & Hanisch, 1999; Newton et al., 2014). Volunteers are essential to nonprofit organizations, as they help organizations to increase the scope of their work while providing access to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed without depleting organizational budgets. While volunteers are often considered the “backbone” of nonprofit organizations (Alfes et al., 2017, p. 3), nonprofits must be wary of exercising too much control in how volunteers operate to ensure these individuals are considered bona fide volunteers as set forth in the Fair Labor Standards Act otherwise risking them being labeled as unpaid employees (Nesbit et al., 2018; Thomas, 2024).

Given the increasing usage of a volunteer workforce, there is more emphasis on the professional management of

volunteers (Alfes et al., 2017; Cunningham, 1999; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Ferreira et al., 2009; Lynch & Smith, 2009). Tails, like many nonprofit organizations, faces common challenges including recruitment, retention, and training. As a former human resources major, Danielle ponders if she could transfer human resource management practices created in the for-profit sector to her nonprofit organization. Human resources practices from the for-profit sector include recruitment, selection, appraisal, rewards, measurement, training, development, communications, and work design (Beatty et al., 2003). While research on human resource management in voluntary organizations is limited (Cuskelly et al., 2006), Danielle quickly discovers evidence that many practices developed in traditional, paid contexts are applicable to volunteerism (Alfes et al., 2017; Cunningham, 1999; Ferreira et al., 2009; Lynch & Smith, 2009; Nesbit et al., 2018; Saksida et al., 2017; Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013). For example, traditional human resource management practices are shown to influence volunteers’ performance, well-being, retention, commitment and satisfaction (Ferreira et al., 2009; Saksida et al., 2017; Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013). After consulting with the previous director, Danielle believes many of the issues her organization faces are related to recruiting and training.

Current Recruitment Strategy

Recruiting the right employees is critical for organizational operations (Wilk & Cappelli, 2003) with the recruitment of volunteers possessing many similarities to attracting paid employees (Alfes et al., 2017; Lynch & Smith, 2009). For many nonprofits, volunteers compose a large portion of their workforce and for smaller nonprofits, such as Tails, many exclusively rely upon volunteer labor (Jäger et al., 2007) making attracting and retaining great volunteers to be paramount. Recruiting can be exceptionally difficult for organizations due to the lack of individuals willing

to volunteer and of those willing, many lack the appropriate skills to carry out the task (Gaskin & Smith, 1995).

The goal of recruiting for nonprofits is to attract suitable applicants as quickly and as cheaply as possible (Alfes et al., 2017). Like many small, nonprofits organizations, Tails relies upon ad hoc methods in which current volunteers recruit family, friends, and acquaintances through word of mouth (Alfes et al., 2017). Doing this allows Tails to take advantage of cost-savings. Additionally, it takes advantage of the social aspects of volunteering as individuals often know one another before they begin volunteering together at Tails. While this approach has advantages, it has left Tails with a shortage of skilled volunteers with many unsure of exactly what their roles are within the organization as Tails does not engage in written job descriptions but instead attempts to verbally clarify roles upon starting.

Current Training Strategy

Training volunteers is of the upmost importance as volunteers help nonprofit organizations succeed as the knowledge and skills of volunteers often allows nonprofits to carry out their missions (Saksida et al., 2017). Through training, volunteers learn specific job-related skills and behaviors needed to be effective in their roles (Ferreira et al., 2009). Providing adequate training and development opportunities help increase retention, volunteer satisfaction, community engagement, and organizational commitment (Ferreira et al., 2009; Newton et al., 2014).

Danielle's current approach to training is a bit lackadaisical as Tails does not have any type of formal training program. Volunteers are quickly thrown into the fire and are expected to pick things up as they progress. There are no written objectives or materials to guide volunteers in activities needed for organizational success. Orientation is non-existent and many volunteers are episodic as Tails does not have any long-term plans in place to help volunteers thrive within the organization. Danielle recognizes that Tails must enhance their recruitment, retention and training of volunteers and has tasked Carlise, a human resources student at State University, with interviewing current and former volunteers. After extensive interviewing Carlise organizes the issues into two key areas.

Interview Results

Overwhelmed

The first area of concern for volunteers is feeling overwhelmed. As Tails continues to grow, requests for assistance keep pouring in. One volunteer stated the constant shifting of foster dogs and major transport needs led to physical fatigue, while the constant stream of rejections harmed his psyche. Burnout is a major problem as volunteers suffer from mental and physical exhaustion. This experience is not uncommon in the animal welfare world as animal care workers are highly susceptible to compassion fatigue as they lose the ability to nurture animals (Jacobs & Reese, 2021). Historically, Tails has struggled incorporating new volunteers into their organization as many poten-

tial volunteers show an interest, however very few follow through and even those helping out only do so for a short period of time as they show up once and are never heard from again. Danielle faces a major hurdle within the organization as retention is low and she must keep turning to volunteers that already have too many responsibilities.

Seeing these struggles can ultimately influence recruiting as current members indicated less willingness to reach out to potential recruits as they did not want to involve friends and family in an organization that is so physically and emotionally draining. Several respondents also mentioned that one big reason that so many individuals volunteer once and are never heard from again is just how evident the lack of staffing in the organization is as the same volunteers are repeatedly asked to participate in all organizational areas. Potential volunteers may be unwilling to shoulder this type of burden.

Working Environment

A second area of concern for volunteers is a difficult working environment. Some volunteers are self-starters and consider rescuing animals to be a calling, while others were unable to elaborate to their friends, families and coworkers why they subjected themselves to such a tough situation. Some volunteers felt they did not have the required abilities to complete assigned tasks and were being set up to fail as they were being "thrown into the fire" too quickly. Tails does not have any type of training program and volunteers are expected to pick things up as they go. This lack of training is a huge impediment to Tails success as studies demonstrate a lack of training can lead to lower levels of efficiency, job satisfaction, and retention of volunteers (Ferreira et al., 2012; Lowenberg-DeBoer & Akdere, 2018).

To help improve training, respondents discussed how Tails fails to understand their motives for volunteering with the organization. For example, younger respondents mentioned volunteering to help acquire skills needed for the workplace. They often discussed a desire to learn more about fundraising, grant writing, and marketing hoping these skills would enhance their value in the job market. Older respondents frequently discussed the more social aspects of volunteering as involvement in the organization allowed them to see friends and acquaintances more often while broadening their networks.

Conclusion

Danielle is committed to helping her volunteers with their issues; however, she has a difficult task. Given the intense pressure she feels, she must act immediately before she loses additional volunteers and more animals lose their lives. A table with key quotes from the interviews is on the following page, while suggested case questions are below.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Quotes from Current and Former Volunteers

"All of our reasons for volunteering are different. Some people view saving animals as their life's calling which is great, but I just wanted to help sporadically, and it didn't feel like my help was wanted at all. It felt like Tails wanted me to sign my life away."
"It was difficult staying motivated. Rescuing is so tough, and I didn't really have any support system to turn to. My friends and family constantly asked why I was putting myself through what they perceived as pure hell, and I just didn't have a good answer to that."
"I'm a self-starter with a passion for rescuing animals. Helping animals is my calling."
"I was really hoping to pick up useful skills, but that didn't happen."
"Seeing all of the animals that we have saved from a life of misery is plenty of motivation for me."
"I felt a bit helpless as the barrage of requests never ceased and my abilities did not match the needs."
"We're basically thrown to the wolves immediately. I enjoy helping animals, but I can't be expected to get rescue commitments. I don't have the network. There needs to be some sort of introductory period."
"Overwhelming. Complete and utter exhaustion. Constantly rotating foster dogs and doing transports breaks you down physically, while the constant stream of rejections erodes you emotionally."
"Our success is our biggest enemy. The more we save, the more requests we get."
"It is non-stop. There are no breaks. Family commitments are no longer a priority. Once you are ingrained into the rescue network, it is impossible to get out."
"We really struggle with getting new volunteers engaged. Whenever we put out the SOS for volunteers on our Facebook page, we get dozens of offers to help, however only one or two of those people are willing to do anything."
"Coordinating transports is so difficult. Almost all of our animals go out of state with most going over eight hours away. We must get a larger network of drivers as we often use the same volunteers repeatedly and they're either going to burnout or already have."
"I feel like I am taken for granted. Everyone knows how much I help, but I'm not shown much gratitude. I'm known enough that I could start my own rescue and be successful."
"It's hard to plan for things. I never know when I will be asked to drop everything and help."
"It is evident just how overloaded the few of us that consistently volunteer truly are. If I weren't already heavily involved, I wouldn't want to be after seeing this."
"I enjoy getting to link up with friends and help a good cause."

Suggested Case Questions

Recruiting

Imagine that you are Danielle, and you need to attract volunteers to your organization. How would you go about building a pool of volunteers to potentially draw from? Please consider the sources you will use to recruit and the advantages/disadvantages of each. Remember, you have limited resources, so using lower cost sources is preferred. How would you sell the organization to potential recruits? How will you evaluate the success of your recruiting? Try to think outside of the box a bit with this.

Training

Imagine that you have been named as an assistant director. This position requires overseeing several aspects associated with animal rescue including fostering animals, coordinating transports, managing social media, and fundraising. Broadly, how would you go about training your new cohort of volunteers? What are your primary objectives? What methods would you use?

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Teaching Notes for Evaluating Student Responses

Overview

This case gives students the ability to act in a managerial role for a small, nonprofit organization by designing human resource practices related to recruiting/retaining and training volunteers. This case allows students to make decisions outside of traditional organizational settings as traditional managerial practices, such as the “carrots and sticks” approach are less useful given limited funding and organizational directors not having high levels of formal authority due to a reliance on volunteers.

Audience

This case would be most appropriate for introductory human resources, entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship classes. However, elements of the case could fit into introductory management or organizational behavior courses. Case is designed to take approximately one hour, including in-class discussion.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be able to design strategies to attract/retain volunteers and evaluate the success of their recruiting strategies.
2. Students will be able to create a training program with learning objectives and discuss methods organizations utilize for training.

Recruiting

Students may suggest taking more of a “big tent” approach as organizations may decide to cast a broad net to attract as many recruits as possible. To accomplish this, organizations often utilize social media, such as Facebook to help attract older volunteers and Tiktok to help attract younger volunteers (Auxier & Anderson, 2021) along with other media such as doing television and newspaper interviews. One potential downside is these recruits may not be highly committed to the organization as they lack motivation (Finkelstein, 2008).

Another approach is targeted recruitment as organizational members turn to their family, friends, and acquaintances for help. They may also target places likely to have volunteers committed to the mission of the rescue such as animal-related clubs within high schools and colleges as these individuals often possess more altruistic motives given their current interests in animals (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998).

To help sell the organization to recruits, organizations may emphasize personal values as animal shelter workers often consider their work to be a calling (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), promote a social responsibility angle (Clary, et al., 1998), mention the warm glow effect associated with volunteering as it makes people feel better about themselves (Brown, Meer & Williams, 2019), and discuss the

possibility of broadening networks through volunteering (Isham, Kolodinsky & Kimberly, 2006).

To evaluate the success of recruiting measures, students may emphasize the roles of efficiency and strategy-oriented metrics. Efficiency metrics are the most common and include the number of recruits and the costs per recruit (Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013). Students also commonly consider conducting volunteer satisfaction surveys as satisfied recruits are more likely to stay with an organization (Omoto & Snyder, 1995).

The biggest issue students struggle with in this section relates to the limitation of resources that non-profits often deal with. Students generally suggest using recruitment sources that are expensive, such as posting on job boards, paying influencers to promote the rescue and buying television advertisements during primetime viewing, such as during the Super Bowl.

Training

Training is fundamental to organizations as it helps workers improve in their jobs. Improvement comes from employees acquiring new knowledge, skills, and abilities or improving the affective aspects of a job, such as changing attitudes toward work requirements (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). Training must be based on the strategy of the organization to be effective with trainings conducted to help organizations meet their needs and create a sustainable competitive advantage. The training process begins with a needs assessment followed by developing learning objectives, designing and implementing the program, and concludes with evaluation (Latham, 1988).

The needs assessment dictates how the training benefits the organization and the workers, along with which workers need the training. Every training isn't always required as some trainings fall outside of an individual's job parameters. A major decision point for the new organizational leadership is how broad training should be. One option is for volunteers to specialize in one of the key areas of rescue, such as fostering, fundraising, or managing social media. The other option is a broader training program in which volunteers receive training on all rescue functions. This type of training is generally referred to as cross-training. If an organization has a large volunteer pool, the first option allows volunteers to excel in a particular area, however for organizations with smaller pools, cross-training may be more appropriate as volunteers carry out numerous tasks.

Developing learning objectives is the next step. With this step, the organization details exactly what volunteers should take away from the training. For example, the organization may need volunteers to become better equipped at handling unruly animals, learning how to overcome initial objections with fundraising, or better appreciating the little help the community does provide.

Next, the organization develops and implements the training. A key in this step is determining the methods used in the training. The organization could utilize many tools

including lecture-based classrooms, online learning modules, or on-the-job training (Martin, Kolomitro and Lam, 2014). Lecture-based classrooms are great for imparting knowledge, however getting all volunteers together at one time can be difficult with multiple trainings being costly. Online trainings allow organizations to reach many people on their own schedules, but volunteers may not take these trainings seriously. On-the-job training allows volunteers to “get their hands dirty” but are limited in the number of volunteers that can be reached.

Finally, the organization evaluates the training. Evaluations often consist of examining the costs of the training, whether volunteers are applying what they learned to their jobs, and if volunteers enjoyed the training.

The biggest issue students often face with training relates to an inability to narrow their learning objectives. Students often fail to generate a training program based on the learning objectives because they opt to be too broad as they attempt to train everyone on everything. In practice, this is difficult as volunteers often have limited time and may not be interested in learning about all aspects of animal rescue.

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