

Strategies to Enhance Staff Retention

Hiring great people is just one part of using Human Resources to align with today's behavioral health care environment. You still need to retain these providers who deliver services, plan programs, support your technology needs, and ensure your billing stays on target. As a non-profit manager, you may think your ability to retain great people is limited because you cannot provide the same kinds of salaries as for-profit agencies, hospitals, or even the government. But staff retention is driven by many factors beyond compensation.

Why Staff Stay

First, it is important to understand what motivates good staff to stay. Many people believe the decision to stay or leave a job is based primarily on salary. But the research says otherwise. Consider this statistic from Gallup: *89% of employers think employees leave for more money but actually only 12% do.*

Why do people leave? There are many reasons, including the work itself ("tough population", "concerns about safety", or "too much paperwork"), and problems with supervisors.

But maybe the more important question to consider is why people stay. There are many reasons, but they boil down to a few basic categories:

- Great organization
- Great leaders
- Great job
- Great rewards

Information gathering

This list points to the fact that excelling in retaining staff is a task for an entire organization, not just those responsible for Human Resources.

In many organizations, the first step in improving employee retention is to understand more about what drives some staff to leave, and others to stay. This might involve:

- **Data collection and analysis** – look at retention from a variety of angles. Compare across divisions and across programs. Look at how well individual managers retain good staff. Look at the data from a diversity angle – are people of color more likely to leave than White staff? Are staff who work in the field less likely to stay than those who work in an office setting? How about

employees who leave within 90 days of hire, vs those who stay on for at least a year?

You may also want to dig beyond the numbers to learn why people are leaving your organization, perhaps tapping into information collected through exit interviews. Of particular interest might be whether people are leaving your agency for another position within the field, or leaving the field altogether.

Your data may point to specific issues of concern that you will then be able to address strategically.

- **Employee engagement and satisfaction surveys** – if you’re not already regularly surveying your staff, start doing so. Ask questions both about satisfaction (how much you enjoy the job) as well as engagement (loyalty and connection to the job, interest in leaving in the near future). Use these surveys as a way to illuminate where you’re succeeding (themes you might highlight to potential job candidates) as well as where you might benefit from some additional work.

Armed with information about your retention and attrition situation, you are now able to take some action.

Hiring Practices

The first step in effective retention is to ensure your agency is hiring the right people. There are a few human resource practices that have emerged in recent years that make it more likely that the people you bring on will match your needs and not leave immediately:

Honest job descriptions – when job descriptions minimize realities such as the amount of time spent in meetings, trying to track down missing clients, or completing documentation, then new hires might feel unhappy, and even resentful. Consider building language into job descriptions that lays out how much time is typically spent on different kinds of tasks, or what the tasks really involve (such as working on a team, learning new therapeutic techniques, or attending conferences and trainings). As an alternative, create an addendum that can be given to job candidates during the interview process that lays out these same facts to be clear about from the beginning about what they job entails to reduce disappointment later on.

Realistic job preview – is a hiring tool used to emphasize both the positive and negative aspects of a job. Through watching a video, or spending part of a day shadowing someone with a similar position,

candidates get a feel for the challenges of the work and can assess if this is a good match for them. When people come to a new job understanding what it really entails, they are less likely to leave because they don't like the work itself. (Realistic job previews are most effective with candidates with limited prior experience in human services.)

Competitive salaries and benefits – as much as possible, try to ensure your salaries are competitive with similar agencies in your area. Your competition for quality staff includes others in your specific field (e.g., treatment for substance use disorder), the broader health and human services field (e.g., hospitals, managed care, and agencies providing a broad range of services, as well as private practice and telehealth (for therapists), or non-human service work. If your salaries are lower than average, explore the possibility of nudging salaries upwards in the budgets you develop for new funding proposals. Also ensure that you have a fair salary scale within your organization and that you maintain parity in salary and benefits for positions with similar qualifications and responsibilities. If your agency uses a merit system for compensation, the kinds of behaviors and performance that merit a higher salary should be clearly communicated.

Benefits

For many human service agencies, compensation is tightly tied to contracts with local, State, and Federal agencies and reimbursement rates from third-party payers (including Medicaid and Medicare). For those organizations that have active fundraising programs, limited salaries can be supplemented by philanthropic dollars. But for most agencies, significant increases, although broadly acknowledged as desirable, remain out of reach.

Your benefits package may be an area where you have more flexibility. (Even for-profit companies not involved in human services have viewed benefits packages as opportunities to expand total compensation.)
Some options:

Focus on wellness – As anyone working in human services can explain, the work is often emotionally challenging, and both physical and emotional wellness can suffer. Focusing attention on wellness through benefits (such as working with a local gym to offer membership discounts to staff), sponsoring a lunchtime yoga break, or allowing staff the flexibility to designate sick days as “mental health days” are all ways to demonstrate commitment to staff, and simultaneously be both trauma-informed and “whole health focused” at the employee level.

Flexible location or work hours – through COVID, agencies have learned first-hand that not all jobs need to be 9-5, or office based. Offering staff the option to work non-traditional hours (such as evenings or weekends) or to use home as a base allows agencies to expand their availability to clients and to provide a much-desired flexibility to employees.

Flexible benefits – Every employee comes to the workplace with different needs. Rather than providing the same package to everyone, some workplaces offer every staff member a menu of options from which to select. This allows agencies to stay within their budget and simultaneously provide more targeted benefits to employees.

Training and professional development – to what extent is training available directly through your agency, and do you offer CEUs or supervision towards licensure? If it is a priority, is time set aside for completion of professional development work? Are staff encouraged to attend conferences, webinars, or other learning opportunities? How are staff who are active in professional development rewarded for their efforts? Providing training and professional development opportunities is a draw for many staff, particularly those in earlier stages of their careers.

Supervision & Coaching

It's common wisdom that people don't leave organizations, they leave supervisors. While this isn't 100% accurate, we know that the relationship between supervisor and employee is very important, and there are lots of opportunities to make improvements at the supervisory level that can impact your staff retention rates.

Training for managers/supervisors – to enhance the quality of coaching and feedback, and to help strengthen the relationship between supervisors and the staff who report to them. Some of the elements that could be included in management training in support of retention goals include developing trust with staff, providing feedback, tapping into strengths and interests, showing appreciation, managing conflict, team building, delegation, and conflict resolution.

Stay Interviews – in contrast to exit interviews, during a "Stay Interview," supervisors meet with current employees to talk about what they like and don't like about their job, and what would increase the likelihood that they would "stay" for at least a year or two more. To learn more about Stay Interviews, visit:

[https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/ tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/stayinterviewquestions.aspx](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/stayinterviewquestions.aspx)

Growth and Development Opportunities – there are many ways to help employees grow. For example, there are task-related opportunities such as “stretch assignments,” special projects, or job enlargement. There are also opportunities for increased visibility such as authoring publications, speaking at conferences, or representing the agency at community or state-level meetings. As a first step, it can be helpful to explore with employees their “*deeply embedded interests*” to ensure that the direction of these development opportunities match their values and priorities. (To learn more about “deeply embedded interests” visit <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/job-sculpting-the-art-of-retaining-your-best-people>)

Mentorship programs – A formal mentorship program provides an opportunity for junior members of an organization to connect with more senior mentors who can provide advice, feedback, or guidance outside of the supervisor/employee relationship. Feeling the support, interest, and guidance of a more senior member of the organization promotes engagement.

Extended onboarding – the first few months (up to six months) of a new staff member’s time on the job should be an intense period of teaching, supervision, and support. Frequent check-ins should be the norm, both to clarify expectations as well as to answer any questions. Efforts should be made to help the new staff person connect with all members of the team, helping that individual to engage and connect with the organization, the program, and colleagues. Some agencies even assign new staff to a “buddy” to encourage deeper connections.

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Work
Culture
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One important issue for many employees is the culture of an organization – how working at Agency A feels different from working at Agency B. Some of the elements that can be targeted for improvement to strengthen employee retention include:

Work/life balance – is there pressure to spend every waking moment on the job, or are staff encouraged to have lives outside of work? This might be demonstrated by the way supervisors or those in leadership positions talk about their own lives outside of work, scheduling very tight deadlines for completing projects, or how program leadership

encourages staff to take vacation time (and not expect them to work during that time off!)

Communication – how is information flowing between leadership and front-line staff. Is it a two-way street? Is information provided frequently, or only on an as-needed basis? Does leadership seek out input from direct care staff? Do staff know what is happening in other Divisions of the organization? Is there a chance to share information and expertise and learn from others in other Divisions? Do front line staff feel heard? Kept in the loop?

Cultural alignment – do staff at all levels have a clear understanding of your organization’s mission, vision, and values? How are these themes shared with staff? Does the behavior of leadership align with these values, or is there a disconnect? Do the organization’s policies and practices align with this approach?

Teamwork – is there an emphasis on good relationships among team members? Is teamwork incentivized? Are there opportunities to develop relationships with staff from other teams? How do people get along, and what is the process for resolving conflicts that arise? Are all members of the team valued equally or is there a hierarchy based on discipline or status?

Valuing staff – how does the organization show it values staff? Is staff well-being considered as important as client well-being? Is there a sense that staff are the organization’s most valuable resource? How does leadership at both the agency and the program levels show appreciation and reward staff, both formally and informally? How frequently is appreciation expressed?

Internal career ladders – does your organization regularly promote staff to positions of higher responsibility, or do you typically bring in new staff to take on leadership roles? Do staff feel like they can learn and grow *within* their organization?

Fun – is the hard work that is expected of staff balanced off with fun? Is the environment strictly all work and no play, or are opportunities to let loose part of the culture? Fun does not have to be expensive – fun might include an annual picnic or other outing, a tradition of incorporating games into staff meetings, or even making a few board games or toys like Legos available in a lunch area.