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Respect and Trust Your People

Respecting and trusting your people
is the foundation of all good management



To successfully lead you must paint a vision of where your nonprofit is headed and what behaviors and attitudes you will value on the journey. You need to establish the qualities of your leadership and the character of the organization. Your tone and behavior should show regard for every employee's strengths, contributions, and cultural background, as well as their health, workplace comfort, and psychological safety. If you are disrespectful of your employees or you disregard their dignity, you undermine trust.

As a leader, you are constantly being evaluated by your team as to whether you treat people with respect and trust. You hire the best people you can and then you trust them to use their judgment to do the right thing. If you don't respect and trust an employee, then you should question why they are still working for you.

Cultivate a supportive organizational culture that moves your nonprofit toward its goals while promoting a respectful workplace where people can contribute their best. Trust is born of respect.

Caring and Collaboration

A key element of respect is encouraging personal discipline and healthy habits so that you and your teams have the stamina and energy to enjoy long-term success. First, take care of your health and fitness. Pay attention to the physical dimensions of your workspace. I encourage people to wear comfortable shoes to work so that they can periodically get up and take a walking break. Moving around during the day keeps the mind sharp and the body relaxed. Establish policies that promote a reasonable work-life balance for employees. Prioritizing and scheduling time for personal relationships, family life, and hobbies is equally important for your mental and emotional health and will help you balance your life and perform better.

Encourage other types of caring behaviors within the organization. Look around and observe how your staff team members interact and care for one another. It's important to prioritize building human connections—they are an important key to success and fundamental to forming trusting relationships. Connections start with conversations. I've often scheduled "walking meetings" with people I need to speak to



one-on-one. It pays dividends to plan offsite meetings where your staff can socialize and build rapport, and where boards can engage in deeper generative discussions.

Building positive relations between your people — staff and board — also helps develop your team's ability to work together better. I encourage people to approach all teamwork with a collaborative mindset, where you treat your partner's success as equal to your own. That applies to internal relationships, external partnerships, and donors.

Hire Deliberately

An organization committed to excellence deliberately focuses on building strong teams. It's critical to identify and recruit a diversity of people who share a commitment to your mission and are willing to learn and adapt as your nonprofit's needs change. Hire for purpose and potential first, for skills second. Before making an employment offer, listen for at least two potential shortcomings that you are willing to live with.

Hiring high-caliber people is always the aim; competence is not sufficient. By high-caliber, I mean people who are resilient, intelligent, and problem solvers. You'll benefit from assembling a diverse and inclusive team with complementary skills and a range of functional backgrounds.

Employee Growth and Satisfaction

Organizations benefit greatly by creating a culture of continuous learning. Staff need professional development opportunities to improve their skills and to gain new ideas. Leaders should communicate and reinforce the value of ongoing education and training opportunities to their staff so that employees take all learning programs seriously. The more employees develop and have the opportunity to contribute to your nonprofit in new ways, the more likely they are to be happy and loyal while working on behalf of your mission.

Financial independence and success are major motivators in life. And, ideally, nonprofit professionals should be able to do well while pursuing the larger goal of doing good. Since nonprofits operate on lean budgets, employee compensation is always a delicate subject. I often hear how employees are overworked and underpaid, and that turnover is high, particularly for fundraising professionals. The chief executive and board should prioritize offering respectable wages and benefits and educate donors on how general operating funds enable the organization to attract and retain excellent people.



Conversation Starters

For Chief Executives

1. How does your organization demonstrate respect for the strengths, contributions, and cultural backgrounds of your employees? How do your policies support their health, workplace comfort, and psychological safety?
2. How do your organization's hiring, promotion, and compensation practices demonstrate respect for your people? How do you ensure that you are integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion into your organization?

For Staff Team Members

1. In what ways does your chief executive model respect and trust? What could they improve?
2. How does your team demonstrate caring, listening, and working collaboratively? What are some opportunities for improvement?

For Board Members

1. What are three ways your board could work more collaboratively as a team and in partnership with your chief executive?
2. How, in the organization's strategic plan and budget, is the board prioritizing equitable compensation and benefits and also encouraging professional growth for all employees?

For Individual Donors

1. How can you assess whether a nonprofit respects and trusts its people and community stakeholders when planning and executing on its mission?
2. How can a nonprofit demonstrate respect and trust to its donors?

For Institutional Philanthropies

1. In what ways do your grantmaking practices communicate respect and trust to your grant applicants? How could you deepen those further?
2. How well does your current funding support grantees in providing respectable wages and benefits, investing in leadership skill development, and strengthening staff and board diversity, equity and inclusion? How could new or increased funding further encourage your grantees to deliver in these areas?