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Dear Project Director:

We are delighted to be able to make this case study available to you to help you make your mentoring program a success. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools under contract with EMT Associates, Inc. Although this publication has not yet been officially released by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been authorized to make it available on the Web at this time to solicit your feedback.

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Sincerely,

Judy Strother Taylor
Project Director



U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study

By Jerry Sherk

Proactively Supporting Staff: Strategies for Reducing Staff Turnover

Case Study

Proactively Supporting Staff: Strategies for Reducing Staff Turnover

Introduction

Coordinating a youth mentoring program can be an enormous challenge. Program personnel are often involved in a number of continuous and on-going tasks, such as recruiting, screening, training, and matching volunteer mentors. And, whether it's worrying about reaching the targeted number of matches, writing grants to obtain funding for the next cycle, telling a potential volunteer they do not qualify for the program, or problem-solving a difficult relationship, implementing a mentoring program can prove to be stressful at times.

According to Ann Hawthorne, a leading expert on volunteer programs, "Employee burnout is one of the most insidious problems facing nonprofits today."¹ It naturally follows that staff burnout often leads to staff turnover—which is a frequent occurrence for youth mentoring programs². Each time a capable staff person leaves, valuable connections are lost between the program team and the mentors, mentees, parents, and partner agencies the departing team member worked with. Additionally, staff turnover can lead to a loss of team morale as other staff adjust to the absence of a co-

worker and perhaps the additional workload they may be acquiring.

Successful mentoring programs need to be implemented by staff members who are sensitive, competent, and have received sufficient training, support, and supervision. To increase the likelihood of getting good outcomes, effective programs are implemented by staff members that receive formalized training to deliver the program. Follow-up training and technical assistance to staff are critical.

Reviews show that, even if the staff is sufficiently trained, the effect of the strategy may be limited by high rates of turnover, low morale, or a lack of "buyin". In addition to consistency in the program, a stable staff provides continuity to the program that allows the implementers to establish trusting relationships with the participants.

While the effect of training for staff of mentoring programs has not been studied, ongoing staff training and professional development has been identified as a best practice by the National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2003).

¹ From "Time Out for You," Management Center, as quoted in "Avoiding -- or Surviving -- Burnout," Charity Channel, Volunteer Management Review, Nan Hawthorne, 2002

² "Developing a Mentoring Program," Susan G. Weinberger, from Handbook of Youth Mentoring, DuBois and Karcher, Sage Publications, 2005

Program Description

Asian Pacific Clinics is a community-based non-profit organization dedicated to providing effective behavioral healthcare for over eighty years. The agency emphasizes culturally competent services with a variety of ethnically specific programs for Asian/Pacific Islanders, Latinos, and Armenian children and families. Integrated services for those with co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse diagnoses have become a key component of the Clinics care, and vocational and housing programs are offered wherever possible because of their importance to consumer recovery goals.

In 1998 Pacific Clinics was awarded a 3-year CSAP grant under the Project Youth Connect (PYC) mentoring initiative to implement the Asian Mastery program (Mentoring and Advocacy Support To Enhance Resiliency in Youth). This is a unique mentoring program designed for recent Chinese immigrant youth and their families. Selected as one of fifteen sites in the nation, the Asian Mastery program was part of a national study designed to determine the effectiveness of mentoring/advocacy programs. The goal of the study design was two-fold:

- To increase resiliency factors to enable young people to overcome the effects of a high-risk environment; and,
- To develop social competence to make better decisions and to decrease risk and harmful behaviors

Asian youth from high-risk environments were recruited and provided intensive long-term one-on-one mentoring, youth, and family service advocacy, and after school social and life skills development group activities.

Evaluations of the PYC mentoring sites showed:

- No significant increase in risk factors, which allowed the participants to maintain healthy attitudes and offset any increased use of illicit drugs or alcohol.
- Improved intervention skills at higher rates than those in other control groups.

- Positive trends in grades, attendance, youth positive perception of school, parent perception of attachment with youth, family adaptability, youth positive feelings toward adults, and parent perception of child's capacity to form positive adult relationships.³

At the end of the grant period, Pacific Clinics reapplied and was one of seven sites to receive three years of additional CSAP funding through a Mentoring and Family Strengthening Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative. This initiative enabled the Asian Mastery mentoring services to be replicated at additional school sites.

After the CSAP funding initiative for Asian Mastery ended, Pacific Clinics was refunded under the Safe and Healthy Schools Initiative. Although the funding was not a mentoring initiative, Pacific Clinics adapted the Asian Mastery program by incorporating violence prevention and a heavier emphasis on school-based services to the original mentoring model.

During this time Asian Mastery has been quite successful in achieving its goals and in bringing mentoring to underserved communities. According to Project Director Rocco Cheng, Ph.D., having competent long-term staff who are satisfied with their job and feel supported is a critical component of this success. Over the course of time, Dr. Cheng has learned a variety of techniques for pro-actively supporting and maintaining staff. While a number of staff have come and gone since 1998, a few still remain—including one of the initial Mentor Coordinators.

Best Practices and Strategies

There are several key strategies that Dr. Cheng and the Asian Mastery team have employed to proactively support and maintain staff members.

#1 Start with a Solid Program Foundation and Feasible Goals

Creating a solid mentoring program design on the front-end with appropriate match goals and achievable outcomes is critical for keeping staff from feeling overburdened and fostering positive staff morale.

Identify Appropriate Staff to Match Ratios.

It may be too late for this funding cycle (as you've already made promises to the funding source), but if your program is overextended, next time set achievable goals as the program is developed. Each time your organization responds to a grant, make sure that it proposes an achievable number of matches. One hundred and fifty matches the first year of the grant, undertaken by one or two staff, is probably not realistic. To reduce stress, and to increase a program's effectiveness, make sure the "staff-to-match" ratio is appropriate for your mentoring service design, for example one staff person monitoring around 30 matches (1:30) for a one-on-one design.⁴

Identify Feasible Goals and Outcomes.

Also, during the grant writing stage be relatively cautious when proposing mentee outcomes, such as increases in grade point averages, reductions in behavioral referrals, etc. Setting program goals too high not only sets a *program* up for failure, but makes staff feel they too have failed if the goals are not met.

⁴ "Frequently Asked Questions for New Mentoring Programs," North, Sherk, & Taylor, Evaluation Management and Training, 2003

#2 Be Clear About Roles, Responsibilities, and Funding Cycles

Create Clear Job and Task Descriptions

How can we expect staff to carve out meaningful roles for volunteers when staff do not adequately understand their own role?⁵ New program staff will be much more at ease if their job descriptions and the program's expectations are clearly defined.⁶ New staff might become frustrated and upset if, after being hired, they find out they are required to (for example) provide recruiting presentations in front of large audiences, take the lead on training mentors, recruit twenty mentors a month, or work on the weekends.

Standardize Operating Procedures

What are the steps to take when a potential volunteer makes an inquiry? Is there a phone script for interviewing volunteer references? What should staff do when a mentor reports that his or her mentee may have been abused? These and scores of other situations should be discussed, and systems developed to handle each contingency. Staff members are less likely to be stressed by these situations if they have clear guidelines to follow. Additionally, institutional knowledge is not lost if a staff person does decide to leave.

Assess Staff Time Management.

A good way to go about this is to list the ten tasks outlined in "Recommend Best Practices for Mentoring Programs"⁷ and then ask each program staff what percentage of their time they spend on each program task (you can also do this for yourself). Most individuals report they spend the majority of their time in "mentor recruitment." If this is true for your program, staff load can be lightened if a small team of people consistently come together to create a formal recruiting plan, and share recruiting tasks.

⁵ "Building Staff/Volunteer Relations," Ivan Scheier, Energize Inc., Philadelphia, 1993

⁶ "Generic Policy and Procedure Manual," www.nwrel.org/mentoring/pdf/policy_manual.pdf

⁷ "Recommended Best Practices for Mentoring Programs,"

Acknowledge Grant Funding Cycles. It is important to have open discussions with employees about what will happen to their job after grant funding ends. This should be addressed during the initial hiring process and should also be discussed as grant funding comes closer to ending. The potential end of grant funding can be a major reason for staff to leave prematurely. While this may not be completely avoided, discussing an employees longevity with the agency past the grant cycle is an important discussion to have.

#3 Apply Mentoring Principles to Staff

Value the Nature of Relationships. A key philosophy of mentoring is the development of relationships built on trust and respect between the mentors and the mentees. This principle can be applied to program management and staff as well. For example a principle learned in the customer service discipline has great relevance when translated to the field of volunteer involvement. Staff will tend to treat volunteers in the same way that management treats staff. Supervisory styles tend to flow downhill, and an organization in which leadership fails to empower staff will have great difficulty in encouraging staff to empower volunteers. An organization in which staff feel a lack of respect will also tend to not respect volunteers.⁸

Recognize Program Staff. One way to make staff feel supported is to provide staff with the same kinds of 'psychological paychecks as volunteers receive. In a book entitled *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*⁹ the author cited a study that asked 1500 employees what they would most like to receive from their employers/managers that they are not currently receiving. Four of the top five responses had to do with some form of recognition. This included:

- Personal congratulations
- Written notes of thanks
- Public recognition of performance
- Group celebrations

Remember everyone is motivated differently. One team member might be very motivated by public recognition, for example, while another might be more reserved and feel embarrassed by being singled out. If possible, when working with someone try to assess what motivates them and make a note of it.

Additional ways to recognize your staff can include:

- Giving certificates of appreciation to be handed out at staff events (picnics, holiday parties, trainings, etc.).
- Holding an all-day off-site retreat that includes fun activities, such as games, icebreakers, and team-building exercises.
- Soliciting donations for gift certificates to restaurants, movie passes, etc. and giving them out to staff as a thank you.
- Saying "thank you" for any extra effort shown by staff.
- Praising staff for innovative ideas, praise they receive from program participants, or community members.
- Remembering birthdays.

These are only a few ideas for recognizing and appreciating staff—the list is endless. Be creative and think of what your particular staff would enjoy and value.

⁸ McCurley, 1995, as quoted in "Effective Relationships Between Staff and Volunteers," Merrill Associates, 2000, <http://www.merrillassociates.com/topic/2000>

⁹ Bob Nelson, Workman Publishing, New York, 1994

#4 Create On-Going Support Systems

Solicit Feedback from Staff to Assess Potential Issues. A critical step to reducing staff burnout is to find out what issues your employees are facing. The best way to do this is to ask. Consider holding a focus group with staff and management to determine what challenges employees are facing in the workplace. During these meetings, management must be willing to take a back seat and listen to employee input in order to make sure that staff are respected and are empowered to fully participate in planning and decision-making. Meetings should discuss the workload (Is it too overwhelming?) and the program's operational procedures (How can they be improved?). Also make sure to check to see if staff are experiencing boredom, emotional fatigue, frustration or anger, or if there is a disconnect between program staff and administrators.

After the meeting be sure to utilize the feedback from your focus group to guide improvements in the program's operations, or staff will become even more frustrated.

Be Accessible Your staff need the support of management, especially when they're new. Even though as a program director you have a lot of work on your plate, you need to be there for staff when they have questions or need advice. As a manager, you should have an open door policy—meaning that your staff knows they can come to you at any time. Be sure that you “walk the walk”; saying your door is always open but being terse or unresponsive when approached undermines rapport.

Be an Advocate. As a manager, it's your job to make your staffs' jobs easier. That often involves relinquishing the idea of top-down management. Because mentoring program staff often wear multiple hats, managers must also take on different roles. Your staff needs to know you're on their side—whether it's standing up for them in interoffice conflicts, advocating for a pay

raise, or helping them get work done when they're feeling overwhelmed. You need to be willing to roll up your sleeves and do the work that's required, even if it's not in your job description. This not only supports your staff, but also sets a good example for them as they work with volunteers and mentees. .

Provide Opportunities for Professional Growth Everyone wants to progress in their career, and your staff are no exception. As staff is hired, begin the educational process by providing training on program management and mentor support tasks¹⁰. Sending them to trainings or providing training for them not only increases their skills related to your program, it also increases their sense of competency and helps them feel satisfied with their jobs. Within reason, you can even encourage staff to attend trainings that are not directly related to their job; you might discover hidden talent that could come in handy!

Program Replicability

The bottom line in reducing staff burnout is to let your staff know they're appreciated. Praising, recognizing, and supporting employees is key, but it is also critical to make them feel they're a real and important part of your team. Solicit staff feedback regularly, and use what you learn to make program improvements. Ask your employees to think creatively about their jobs and make suggestions to help the program—then, as much as possible, use their suggestions. Include staff in planning meetings and in decision-making whenever possible, and create an atmosphere where everyone in the agency feels that they're part of the mission of the organization.

¹⁰ “Developing a Mentoring Program,” Susan G. Weinberger, from Handbook of Youth Mentoring, DuBois and Karcher, Sage Publications, 2005

Replication Checklist

- √ Hold staff meetings to assess how the program's operational procedures (and staff tasks) can be improved.
- √ When writing grants, make sure the goals and outcomes (especially the number of matches) are attainable.
- √ Develop clear job and task descriptions.
- √ Using a document entitled, "Recommended Practices for Youth Mentoring Programs," assist staff to assess how much time they are spending in specific areas of the program. After the assessment, if they working an inordinate amount of time in one or more areas, find ways of supporting them.
- √ Make (and continually update) a list of ways to recognize staff. Include face-to-face acknowledgements, written notes, public recognition of individuals, and group celebrations.
- √ Develop an "open door policy" – let staff know that they can talk to you any time for any reason.
- √ Advocate for pay raises and other benefits when appropriate, and mediate when conflicts arise.
- √ Provide opportunities for personal development, such as workshops.

About the Author

Jerry Sherk runs Mentor Management Systems, a business that provides technical assistance for organizations that want to develop youth mentoring programs. Mentor Management Systems also helps adult mentoring programs, so that mentees can improve their skills and advance in their careers.

Over the past 10 years, Sherk has helped develop 250 mentoring programs. He leads workshops, develops training materials and mentoring systems, and writes workbooks related to mentoring. Sherk was one of the founders of the Mentoring Coalition of San Diego County and is past president of the NFL Retired Football Players Association in San Diego.

Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study Series

The Mentoring Resource Center (MRC) has been created to provide United States Department of Education Mentoring Program grantees with training, technical assistance, publications, research, and consultation, all in an effort to help their program staff design and implement the highest quality mentoring programs. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, the MRC is a collaborative effort between EMT Associates, located in Folsom, CA, and the National Mentoring Center, located in Portland, OR.

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The MRC Case Study Series offers effective strategies and insights from successful programs on various topic areas. We are always on the lookout for successful programs and potential topics. Please contact us with your recommendations for future Case Study articles.



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