



I've Been Thinking about ...

# Team-Building

How can you sustain staff commitment and create an effective team? Is it worth the investment?

By Martha Golensky

Two staff members of a national organization scammed several hundred thousand dollars from their employer by counterfeiting travel receipts and pocketing the money, according to a recent news story.<sup>1</sup> In describing how the two were caught, the piece argued for instituting controls to protect assets, which is certainly an important step. However, I was more concerned about the underlying issue that wasn't addressed: These employees had put *their* interests ahead of the charity's.

The story hit home. I once had the sad experience of discovering a valued staffer had stolen from the nonprofit I then led. Her theft came to light through the annual audit,

Had our organization failed her by not nurturing a strong enough dedication to our meaningful work?

She decided to give herself the raise by stealing small amounts of money every pay period.

by which time she had moved on to another organization.

When confronted with the facts, she readily admitted her actions but justified them on the basis of having been promised a raise by my predecessor that I had denied. It was true that she'd requested the raise shortly after I came on board, but I'd found no documentation to support her claim. More important, the organization's financial circumstances didn't permit me to honor her request. Since she was our chief fiscal officer, I thought she would understand. Instead, she decided to give herself the raise by stealing small amounts of money every pay period, covering her tracks by falsifying the backup documents she gave me when I signed the checks.

It was disturbing to think someone could be so duplicitous but also

that I had been so easily fooled. Could a better system of controls have prevented this problem? Perhaps, although the news story on the scam noted that a determined person can almost always get around controls, and in my case, the individual was in the perfect position for her deceit. Was she, then, just a bad apple? Or had our organization failed her by not nurturing a strong enough dedication to our meaningful work? I had inherited this employee, so it was hard to say.

Another recent news story addressed nonprofits' problems in holding on to talented young staff, citing a survey that showed an alarmingly high percentage of employees leaving the nonprofit sector. The survey respondents said they left nonprofits mainly because of inadequate compensation and stressful working conditions. They also complained that they weren't being groomed for senior positions and had no clear career path.<sup>2</sup>

The link between these two stories is the failure by many nonprofits to build effective teams. Team-building requires a deep understanding

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of what motivates staff members.

If your organization purchased a building, you wouldn't let your investment lose value by failing to maintain it. But are you making the same commitment to your employees?

The case is strong for building a staff-development program sculpted to meet the needs of your employees. Your program should focus on motivational team-building activities, including mentoring and coaching.<sup>3</sup> It should also offer educational opportunities such as workshops, teleconferencing, and Web-based instruction.<sup>4</sup> If your organization is too small to offer these tools in-house, you can bring

in a consultant or someone from a local business, public agency, or another nonprofit.

I guarantee that you, as the CEO, will sleep better knowing you've done everything within reason to show staff you respect and care about them. In return, your employees are more likely to reward you with sustained loyalty even if compensation might be better elsewhere. ■

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Perspectives on this and similar accounts are offered by these *Nonprofit World* (www.snpo.org) items: "Nonprofit Ethical & Fraud-Prevention Lapses Found" (Vol. 26, No. 5), "Embezzlement Alarming Common in Nonprofits" (Vol. 26, No. 4), and "Nine Steps to Prevent Fraud" (Vol. 26, No. 2). "Common-Sense Approaches to Fraud Awareness, Prevention, and Detection" (Vol. 15, No. 4) explains why everyone is capable of fraud and what to do about it. Also see "Fraud: How to Prevent It in Your Organization" (Vol. 26, No. 3) and "Setting Up a Control System for Your Organization" (Vol. 16, No 3) at www.snpo.org.

<sup>2</sup>Check out "Why Are Your Employees

Leaving?" in *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (www.snpo.org).

<sup>3</sup>For example, take a look at "Designing and Sustaining Effective Organizational Teams," in R. L. Edwards & J. A. Yankey (Eds.), *Effectively Managing Nonprofit Organizations*, NASW Press (www.naswpress.org), as well as these *Nonprofit World* articles (www.snpo.org): "Build a Powerful Staff Team" (Vol. 18, No. 4), "Zen and the Art of Team Building" (Vol. 20, No. 1), and "The Key to Building Productive Teams" (Vol. 21, No. 4).

<sup>4</sup>See "Using Training Strategically to Build Organizational Capacity," *Nonprofit World* (Vol. 14, No. 4), www.snpo.org. Also see Learning Institute programs online at www.snpo.org/li.

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