

# Build a Powerful Staff Team

*Draw on a resource that's better than money—people power*



*Through its community connections, Thorpe has renovated two abandoned buildings into shelter and services for families in the Bronx.*

**N**o nonprofit leader succeeds alone. To shepherd your organization to success, you need to create a team.

One nonprofit leader who has raised teamwork to a fine art is Sister Barbara Lenniger, executive director of Thorpe Family Residence in the Bronx. The 10-year-old organization provides transitional shelter for homeless mothers and children. It also offers permanent supportive housing for families. Many former residents have moved on to independent living after finishing school and obtaining jobs.

Organizations like Thorpe, with ambitious goals but little money, succeed by strengthening connections between people. Leaders like Sister Barbara know how to ignite people's passion and forge a dynamic team of board, staff, and community volunteers. The leader of a team-based organization needs to:

► **Dissolve barriers to collaboration.** Sister Barbara constantly reaches out to the community to encourage working together for common goals. A community program for "youth at risk," for example, builds self-esteem in young people while providing volunteers to help the mothers and kids at Thorpe Family Residence.

► **Find common ground.** A team's value is the different viewpoints and talents it brings together. A good leader respects these differences while stressing commonalities. Thorpe Family Residence depends heavily on community participation. Many volunteers come from local high schools and colleges. They help with recreation, provide tutoring, act as Big Sisters and Brothers, and lend support in innumerable ways. While coordinating so many different types of workers is one of the biggest challenges, it is also one of Thorpe's greatest strengths.

► **Be a coach, not a commander.** Concentrate on deepening people's loyalty and trust, not telling them what to do. Show them you have confidence in their ability to make the right decisions. But let them know you're there to help and support them whenever they need you.

► **Pay attention to morale.** Sister Barbara starts every meeting by asking everyone to share something positive. She also suggests boosting morale by sending staff home early after a difficult task has been accomplished. Such small things go a long way toward inspiring people and focusing them on the dream.

► **Celebrate success, and reward progress.** Give praise and recognition to people at all levels of the organization. Take every opportunity to reinforce people's sense of being part of a powerful team.

## How Your Actions Mold Your Organization's Culture

You shape your organization's culture through:

- what you pay attention to, ask about, and praise
- how you assign responsibility and react to crises
- how you behave as a role model and demonstrate qualities such as empathy, loyalty, and self-sacrifice
- what behaviors you choose to reward
- whom you hire, fire, and promote.

From *Organizational Culture & Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

► **Give people plenty of feedback about how they're doing.** Show them how much closer they're coming to their objectives. (See "How to Measure Team Performance" on page 40.)

► **Solicit people's ideas to make change happen.** Changes in the Welfare to Work policy created an urgent need for more day care at Thorpe Family Residence. Instead of panicking, Sister Barbara gathered staff at all levels to hatch ideas. The brainstorming sessions created strong staff bonds as well as a wealth of creative ways to care for kids while mothers pursue jobs and school.

► **Encourage leadership in others.** One of the most gratifying parts of Thorpe's program is seeing high-school and college volunteers blossom into leaders. For such shared leadership to work, people must believe that their supervisors truly want to see them act in new ways. (See "Three Conditions for Devolving Power" on page 27.)

► **Create an organizational culture with clear values.** An organization's culture determines how it transforms its mission into useful work. Molding the culture may be nonprofit leaders' most important job. Leaders' actions—not what they say but what they do—are what staff copy in their own work. (See "How Your Actions

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## Reward Top Performance

- Begin a staff meeting by highlighting the achievement of an individual or team in the organization.
- Write a memo for the personnel file describing outstanding performance.
- In your organization's newsletter or other publications, report staff members' contributions to professional groups in the community.
- Take a top-performing staff colleague to lunch.
- Give small tokens of recognition, such as a book or calendar, to those who exceed expectations.
- Spotlight ordinary but important events of the workplace. One nonprofit leader asked staff to write up actions that deserved praise. At the monthly staff meeting, a drawing was held to determine the winner of a modest prize, a book certificate. Each of the nonwinning entries was also read and applauded, so everyone nominated had a moment of public acknowledgment.

From *Leaders Who Make a Difference*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Three Conditions for Devolving Power

1. Everyone must agree on and share the organization's overall objective.
2. People must have the training, education, and skills to handle local decision-making.
3. The organization must have an explicit structure in place for holding people accountable for the results of their decisions.

From *Making It Happen*, Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications.

focus on our mission and why we continue to do this challenging work.”

► **Resolve conflict quickly.** Left to fester unattended, disagreement can destroy a great team. The best way to manage conflict is to help people abandon their egos to the pursuit of the dream, as Warren Bennis suggests in *Leader to Leader*. He uses the example of the Manhattan Project, the team that invented the atomic bomb. At a critical point, one team member threatened to quit because he couldn't get along with a colleague. The project leader simply asked, “How can you leave? The free world hangs in the balance.” So conflict, even with these diverse people, is resolved by reminding them of the mission.

The leader in a team-based organization is not so much the designer of the organization as the one who shapes the shared culture, as Burt Nanus and Stephen Dobbs note in *Leaders Who Make a Difference* (see “References.”) Strong leaders want to build strong teams, knowing that it's the best way to carry their vision into the future. ■

### References

\*Gooding, Cheryl, “Using Training Strategically to Build Organizational Capacity,” *Nonprofit World*, July-August 1996.

Hesselbein, Frances & Paul Cohen, eds., *Leader to Leader*.

\*Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel and Human Resources, Leadership Series*.

Nanus, Burt and Stephen Dobbs, *Leaders Who Make a Difference*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

\*Starred references are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations, 606-274-9777, <http://danenet.wicip.org/snpo>.

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Mold Your Organization's Culture,” on page 26.) Because Sister Barbara is a role model for sharing, collaborating, and working together, Thorpe Family Residence has a culture of generous giving. “Some of the sisters on our staff belong to different religious communities,” Sister Barbara says. “Their friends in the community are constantly collecting and bringing us donations of food and clothing. We call one sister ‘the shopping bag nun’ because she never arrives empty-handed on a Monday morning.”

► **Tie employee's dreams to your mission.** Or, as Peter Senge put it, create an organization where collective aspiration is set free. To design such an environment, give employees opportunities to attend training together. Just as important, give them time afterward to discuss what they learned and how to put their insights into practice. (See Gooding in “References.”)

► **Harness people's passion.** As one of Thorpe's high-school volunteers says, “The program brings people closer together, helping not only those who receive but those who give.” Such shared passion raises everyone's spirits, giving them optimism for the future and the energy to sustain their commitment.

► **Foster collegiality.** “We celebrate birthdays and holidays together,” says Sister Barbara. “We have potlucks and brunches. We have a seasonal ‘retreat day,’ where we