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Contingent Workers and The Helping Hand Home

Since 1893, the Helping Hand Home has been operating as a non-profit organization that offers residential treatment for severely abused and neglected children. Forty percent of its budget is derived from private donations, so it is clear that the organization does not have the funds to employ a large workforce; it relies heavily on contingent workers and community support. The contingent workers are volunteers made up primarily of middle-aged, stay-at-home mothers and also social work and psychology students from the University of Texas. Due to the volatile nature of a contingent workforce, the Helping Hand Home deals with issues of volunteer commitment and matching the volunteers' skills with the needs of the organization. The Helping Hand Home could better utilize the efforts of their volunteers through a more comprehensive understanding of the volunteers' motivations and abilities and by ensuring that the volunteers have appropriate knowledge and training.

The Helping Hand Home is a relatively flat organization with an executive director, four directors of Home functions, and eighty full-time workers that make up the paid portion of the workforce (Guide Star, 2008). The governance and oversight of the organization is controlled by the four-hundred and fifty volunteers including a board of directors, the community advisor board, the Helping Hand Society members, and all

other volunteers (Helping Hand Home for Children, 2004). Since there are, in essence, two major divisions in the organization, home directors and overall governance, it is essential that the organization is flat so that communication between both divisions can be quick and free of distortion. I expected the organization to be flat because of its relatively small size and because the employees and volunteers must be highly motivated to work with children who have such regrettable circumstances. The directors can motivate the employees and volunteers most effectively with fewer hierarchical levels.

The Helping Hand Home has problems with the level of volunteer commitment and seasonal quality of their contingent workforce. Some volunteers lack emotional commitment or loyalty to the organization because they aren't paid and, for the university students, they are often volunteering in order to build their resumes or career paths in social work. Lack of time commitment for work or meetings often stems from the volunteers' life circumstances, such as family obligations for the mothers, or the availability constraints of summer or class schedules for students.

The second difficulty that the Helping Hand Home commonly faces is the issue of effectively matching the skills of the volunteers to the needs of the organization. Many people want to volunteer at the home but do not have the appropriate skills that are necessary to work with the psychologically, physically, and sexually abused children that the home treats. In these circumstances, many volunteers end up doing activities that may not be their preference and decrease their motivation to serve the home, such as building playscapes for the home.

One way to increase volunteer commitment and effectively match the volunteers' skills to the organization is to implement an extensive interview process for all volunteers. During the interview, the directors should make clear the high level of commitment that is needed for the organization, in the form of both time and a deep-seated motivation to serve. The interview should outline specifics about planned volunteer opportunities and the requirement of attendance for continued involvement in those opportunities. Self-assessment tools should be distributed to the volunteers in the interview to measure the volunteers' individual skills and strengths in order to appropriately match them to the specific volunteer opportunities.

In addition to the comprehensive interview, the organization should conduct a volunteer orientation. The orientation should educate the volunteers on how to interact and work with the abused children. This will help with the retention of the volunteers because people are more likely to stay at an organization if they are competent at what they do and if they feel like they are making a difference.

Admittedly, there are uncontrollable factors that inhibit complete success with a contingent workforce. First, the circumstances and changes that happen in people's lives cannot be foreseen. The high turnover of these volunteers is somewhat inevitable as different responsibilities and time commitments arise in their lives, and they are not tied to their positions through a monetary need. Also, simply telling someone to be motivated or unwaveringly committed to an organization does not make it happen. However, the Helping Hand Home can give the volunteers tools to be motivated and committed by

providing them with complete and upfront communication of volunteer expectations as well as the education and training to perform their jobs well.

Sources

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