

The Motivated Workplace

by the editors

After reading the findings of Paul Light's study of intrinsically motivated nonprofit workforce, *NPQ* searched for case examples of good practice. We found two mature organizations that were interviewed separately but whose approaches and attitudes were strikingly similar. We chose mature organizations because they were more likely to have well developed staff systems that could be easily explained. However, mature organizations often tend to underestimate the significance of intrinsic motivation to their workforce; fortunately, the organizations interviewed broke that mold.

(It is worth noting that the quality of their practice in this area is matched in other areas of management; resource development, financial management, planning, etc.)

Situated in an inner city neighborhood of Boston, Project Hope is an organization that not only runs a shelter for homeless families, but also does a combination of community organizing, community development, education, childcare and policy advocacy. Birmingham Group Health Services, a community mental health center located in Ansonia, Connecticut provides a range of programs in the lower Naugatuck Valley and is deeply involved in policy and legislative advocacy. We interviewed three people at each organization, asking them how they respond to staff motivated by the meaning of their work.

Rose Brown and Tony Reyes prepare a plate at Project Hope's annual "Homecoming Picnic," which brings the families of staff and clients together.

Project Hope co-workers and friends during a retreat. Bottom row, left to right: Rosa Clark, Shelter Program; Millie Garcia, Family Child Care Program; Fabiola Peguero, the Children's Center; Top row, left to right: Sharon Robinson, Finance; Rose Brown, Shelter House Manager; Maria Peguero, Children's Center

Commitment and Passion: Its in the Air We Breathe

When we asked Project Hope what their work environment was like, Margaret Leonard, executive director, responded by talking of the pervasive power of the vision of what they hope to create together. "Certainly our mission to end family homelessness and to build communities that have dignity, self-reliance and interdependence bonds everyone who works at Project Hope—volunteer or paid. People relate to our mission in a deeply personal way; it goes far beyond what we want for our organization, we want it for the world. The personal spirit for this work is so strongly held, you feel it in the air we breathe."

At Birmingham Group Health Services, Trudy Higgins, associate executive director, used almost identical words to describe the way employees feel about coming to work. "What I've seen everyday, in my 11 years at this organization, are people buzzing and chatting in the hallways—and laughter too. No one is moping or grumbling. There's a spark in the air—it's a spirit. It feels good to be in this building and interacting with one another."

The commitment to taking responsibility at every level for creating the right organizational environment is also shared between these two organizations. From Sherri Pozarlick, community services coordinator for The Umbrella, Birmingham Group Health Services' domestic violence program, "I've been here for over 13 years now—beginning as a volunteer, then a part-time worker, now full time for over 11 years. I agree. There's a passion for what you do and a passion for the environment that you are able to do it in."

That sense of being a purposeful community has glue in the form of lived shared values: "What holds us together," affirms Marilyn Cormack, president/CEO of the Birmingham Group Health Services "is the shared belief that we can make

a difference, that our clients can achieve their goals as well as a deep respect that values everyone as human beings capable of learning from one another. These values are so strong that if a person doesn't hold them deeply they won't be happy here. We are consumer centered," she continues. "We expect everyone, within and outside the organization, to be treated with respect and dignity."

The Importance of Staff Development

Both organizations believe that you can never scrimp on training. Professional development is readily available at both organizations and at every level. For example, Project Hope talked about looking at the need for development in a way that linked outside intentions with inside intentions. They have long seen the role of education as being central to the ability of families to craft better futures for themselves. Staff members have also had unusually high levels of access to educational opportunities but recently these two intentions began to move together a bit more. Margaret Leonard, executive director, notes that "...when we developed the workforce training project for families, we offered it to the staff as well. It emphasized lifelong learning—developing a career plan and a learning plan rather than randomly attending single classes.

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The staff was thrilled to participate. The opportunity also deepened their appreciation for Project Hope as an agency."

These commitments can be a bit costly in ways you have to try to forsee. For instance, in the case of the teachers working in the Children's Center program, Project Hope decided to link salary levels to the child development associate (CDA) accreditation—a nationally recognized credential for childcare. "In order for our teachers to gain training while still working, we had to find a way to offer college courses onsite and interim staff while teachers attended classes. This significantly impacted our HR policy and our budget, but it correctly reflected the degree to which we value our staff," states Meg Lusardi, chief of operations.

And Open Communication

Staff at Birmingham Group Health Services set a high premium on being able to talk things through. They plan and share critical issues in their work very freely and according to Sherri Posarlik, "The president/CEO sets the tone for the organization. Marilyn wants to hear from us. When concerns arise, the staff truly has the means to express themselves and know they will be heard. She meets with each department about every six months. Sometimes, we're frustrated and after we crabbed for a while, we find she will always follow up on our concerns. She lets us know what actions she can and can not take. Her actions make me think, 'there's another value I need to emulate.'"

"I am a firm believer in communication," Marilyn chimes in. "I don't think there is a lot of secretiveness in this organization. I believe in giving more information than less—through staff meetings, memos, etc. Good communication enables a sense of openness. If you are running into a problem or if there is something going on with the state government, or whatever, staff wants to know."

"This openness goes beyond meetings and memos," Sherri adds. "We really do talk all the time. I feel welcome to share a frustration and people will share their ideas about how I might approach the issue."

Mutuality

"We have the same open communication with those with whom we work," Trudy continues. "We work with family members and they wish we had a magic wand that could just fix their child and make all the problems go away—and I can understand this clearly as a parent. Well, of course, we can't, but what we *can* promise each parent is to try every possible avenue to help his or her child get what he or she needs to achieve. And that's all we can really try to do. So it feels good to be able to have the freedom to do that and to put your best foot forward every day."

"As you can see there is a sense of oneness between our organization and our constituents," says Sherri. "It's not an 'us and them' mentality—that person in our domestic violence program could be me. She could be anyone I know. We employ people from a variety of different backgrounds. They may be experiencing mental illness. They may have domestic violence histories. They may or may not personally understand the issue at hand, but they don't have to. This value of equality between provider and client is something that improves our work. That's been important to me through all these years."

"And they feel this," Marilyn concurs. "We don't say this is how we can help you—we ask, how can we help you? Right away, we are in partnership with that that person. Let's identify the help you need and together we will work on it. I think this value of mutual respect is very powerful."

Again, Project Hope has a very similar philosophical base, "Our philosophy of mutuality means we learn from and intend to support everyone: staff and clients, in their development—there's no hierarchy of knowledge" states, Lori Thames program director of Childrens Center. "As someone at a recent retreat said, 'as we try to be family for others, we are family for one another.' You will often see this parallel nature between our programs and staff."

Mutuality—Staff Evaluations

Marilyn emphasized the elements in place before the evaluation process can be healthy. "Given the deep sense of personal drive we know exists within our staff, we really do empower

staff to do their job and make independent decisions—so they *know* they are contributing and making a difference. Part of what is involved here is in helping people to acknowledge what they already do and don't know while encouraging them to grow in their jobs. Everyone needs to state what they can follow through on so they and others are clear about what is reasonable and what is not reasonable."

"There's mutual respect across the various levels of the staff, as well as with the mission of the organization. As we mentioned before," adds Trudy, "It happens with actions like Marilyn continually seeking input from departments about operations and communicating back about possible changes and it also is reflected in how we design our annual performance evaluations."

"The job of each individual is then linked to the work of the unit they are in and the whole organization," Trudy elaborates. "We ask people to think about their work in relation to the organization's strategic goals, the department goals, and their own professional growth. People do their own reviews. If they need any guidance they can consult their supervisor. We ask staff to look at their achievements and how they've benefited the organization."

Supervisors also receive feedback from their group. "Sometimes you might read comments about supervisors that suggest an employee is afraid to take on an issue," Trudy continues. "That means there might not be a willingness to hear what the other person is saying. If there's a real trend, we will give feedback and support and ways to change their supervision. We always want to make sure that supervisors are growing."

"Marilyn reads all of the evaluations to identify the professional growth and think about how the organization might adjust training opportunities."

Mutuality in Hiring

The respect for constituents and their development is also reflected in hiring practices. Margaret explains that, "We often hire people who have formerly accessed our services and have had direct experience with homelessness. They may not always have the skills initially, so we help build them. We have our eyes wide open about the challenges of such a choice. We value their experience. It makes a difference when a staff member says to a person who walks through the door, 'I know what its like'. This equalizes the staff-resident relationship so much more."

Project Hope's staff share a feeling of being responsible to and for each other. Meg describes it this way: "We have a sense of equality. When the entire shelter team interviewed a prospective director, they had plenty of questions—they wanted to make sure she was willing to do their job if need be. If someone was sick, could they her call in the middle of the night to fill in? These kinds of questions get to the heart of our mission and values."

Mutual Appreciation

Both Project Hope and Birmingham Group Health Services talk about showing authentic appreciation both towards staff and constituents. This was described by both as being a constant—both in supportive comments in the moment ("I love watching you with that child.") and more formally acknowledgments through newsletters, gifts, events etc. In both organizations, everyone participates in showing appreciation and as Meg from Project Hope comments, "this makes criticism, when it is needed, easier to take."

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"A new co-worker recently remarked that she initially came to work at a job she would just enjoy doing," Lori recalls. "But the way Project Hope had opened its arms and received her blew her away. She feels like she's been a part of us forever."

Indeed, the shared emphasis on unconditional support and acceptance has created intentional families that are truly nurturing and transformational for everyone involved.