

ACCESS LIVING: Promoting Strong Organizational Culture Through HR Management

In Fall 2014, Jerry Rauman, the chief financial officer at Access Living, couldn't have been prouder of what the organization had achieved. The Chicago nonprofit, which provides a wide range of services to people with disabilities around the city, had nearly doubled its staff size over the course of three years.

Staffed largely by people with varying disabilities, Access Living had expanded from 40 people to 75, hiring a strong base of employees to provide services in areas such as housing assistance, training and leadership development to the Chicago community. While their ability to drive positive change had increased tremendously, this rapid growth over such a short period of time had changed how the organization operated, and it was time for Access Living's HR function to catch up.

THE PROBLEM

When Jerry contacted Nonprofit HR for help, he had several priorities. First, he was looking for tips on creating a strong office culture as the organization's staff continued to grow. Next, he wanted to foster improved communication between leadership and employees, get everyone behind a shared mission and build an HR infrastructure that could scale with the organization.

Nonprofit HR approached Access Living's needs holistically. Before Lisa Ponce, Nonprofit HR's Chicago practice lead, could prepare recommendations for

improving the office culture, she wanted to ensure a comprehensive view of Access Living's existing situation, HR infrastructure and service delivery model.

In order to do so, Lisa and her team at Nonprofit HR conducted a cultural needs assessment that involved more than 15 hours of small group and one-on-one interviews with a broad range of stakeholders, including Access Living's HR staff, senior leadership, department directors, managers and employees. In these interviews, Lisa and her team explored each stakeholder's individual role within Access Living, their relationship and experiences with HR, strengths and challenges of the current HR process, organizational imperatives with indirect HR implications and future HR needs. These interviews allowed the team to understand the challenges facing the leadership team and identify trends in employee sentiment.

Nonprofit HR found that while Access Living's HR department had a clear passion for the organization's mission, there was room to improve the way they interacted with the organization's staff on a broad scale. Access Living's staff

understood that the HR department was important for onboarding and conflict resolution, but they did not see the department as adding deeper strategic value to the organization. At the same time, Access Living employees perceived the HR team as inaccessible because HR department office hours weren't aligned with those of the employees.

Lisa and her team at Nonprofit HR also identified larger challenges that resulted from the organization's quick growth. They found that the senior leadership team was not representative of staff diversity and there was minimal senior and director-level turnover, which resulted in limited growth opportunities for the staff. But Lisa knew that these problems were signs of a great organization dealing with growing pains, and she understood how to put HR policies and practices into place that would help them set up a solid framework upon which to grow sustainably.

A NEW SOLUTION

Lisa and her team at Nonprofit HR got to work creating a strategic, long-term HR policy that would present proactive solutions to personnel challenges, redefine the role of the HR department and streamline communication between leadership and employees.

When Jerry saw Lisa's draft of the new HR policy, he was impressed by her level of thoroughness in identifying Access Living's problems, finding solutions, and presenting a comprehensive plan for improving the organization's HR function.

"These recommendations were well thought-out and dealt with concerns that both staff and management had," he says. "Sometimes, there could be conflicting demands with how we do things, and [Nonprofit HR] dealt with that very well."

CONTINUING SUCCESS

Nonprofit HR didn't stop with the delivery of the new policy. The team went a step further and supported Access Living as they began to implement their new HR processes. During the implementation period, Jerry was encouraged by the Nonprofit HR's commitment to his organization and its unique culture.

"About two-thirds of our staff has a disability, but it's a wide range," he says. "That impacts how we do things. One of the best things about working with Nonprofit HR was their willingness to understand how Access Living really works."

With Nonprofit HR's help, Access Living had a new HR strategy in action in about three months, and they were able to start 2015 off strong.

Today, Jerry comes into work to an Access Living team that's happy, communicative and in-the-know about what's going on at the organization. The organization's HR department, which was previously stretched thin with work and lacked the ability to communicate with employees and leadership effectively, now has the organizational structure they need to better allocate time and resources and more effectively foster the organization's culture.

When Jerry describes his office today, he chooses three words: "Inclusion, security and community." Thanks to Nonprofit HR's help, he and his team are better able to balance privacy concerns and staff concerns, maintaining an appropriate level of feedback between leadership and staff. The best part? They have the HR structure that will scale with them as their strong growth continues.

If you're looking for help establishing a HR strategy, improving your organizational culture or solving personnel challenges, contact Nonprofit HR at info@nonprofit.com or visit www.nonprofithr.com.