

Mission-focused Management &
Empowerment Practice
A Handbook for Executive Directors of
Domestic Violence Programs

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Empowerment Management

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR EMPOWERMENT MANAGEMENT WITH STAFF

In addition to staying mission-focused (e.g., proactive, grounded in long-term vision), it is also important to manage staff and volunteers within an empowerment framework. (As noted earlier, not only does this result in a more positive work environment, but businesses engaging in this type of management outperform more traditional businesses on a number of dimensions (including productivity and retention)). Part of laying the groundwork for empowerment management to occur involves thinking about staffing and management policies. A program is only as strong as its staff and volunteers, and these folks can only do their work well if they work in a supportive structure with specific guidelines, visible expectations and consequences, and clear communication. As shown in Part 1 of this handbook, there is some overlap between mission-focused and empowerment management. While some of the guidelines discussed in this chapter are also consistent with laying the groundwork for mission-focused management, all are presented as setting the stage for empowerment management. The following are some guidelines for hiring, training and supervising staff.

Hiring Staff

Many domestic violence programs make the mistake of hiring staff who understand domestic violence dynamics but who lack the traits that make an outstanding employee. For example, some programs rely heavily or exclusively on asking potential employees questions like:

- What causes domestic violence?
- Why don't (all) women leave their abusers?
- What do we need to do to end domestic abuse?
- How comfortable are you working with people from diverse backgrounds?

While these questions are not necessarily bad to include in the job interview, they should not be the strongest predictor of whether someone will be hired. These questions deal with perceptions and perceptions can change when new information is learned. What is probably more important to know about potential employees or volunteers has to do with:

- Personality traits
- Work styles
- Their commitment to social justice

Work styles are directly connected to core personality traits, and both are much harder to change than are perceptions, even with direction and supervision. Therefore, in addition to asking potential employees the standard questions about domestic violence and diversity, it is important to also ask about how organized

they are, how well they communicate with others, how dependable they are and whether they will be competent “team players.” Those being hired into management positions or positions that involve writing should also be subjected to questions or tests related to their writing skills, supervisory style and conflict management.

With regard to having a commitment to social justice, it is helpful if potential employees have a basic understanding of social inequalities and a commitment to social justice. While they may or may not have prior working knowledge about domestic violence, this orientation will help them understand this particular social problem more quickly if they already have a social justice orientation.

Below is a pool of questions you might consider, based on the job for which the candidate is applying:

Interview Questions Pertaining to Personality Traits and Work Styles

- What do you do to effectively communicate with others?
- What experience have you had in pressure situations?
- Tell us about a situation you were in that would demonstrate your ability to work well under pressure.
- What are some means of dealing with stress?
- What does it take to get under your skin?
- How does your experience and education qualify you for this job?
- What makes you want to leave your current job?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how organized are you? What makes you say that?
- In what kinds of situations do you find it most difficult to deal with people?
- What has been your experience in working with community organizations?
- Tell us about your experience in working with volunteers.
- What aspects of your work do you get the most excited about?
- What are your most outstanding qualities?
- What are your weak points, and what are you doing to improve upon them?
- Do you work better by yourself or as part of a team? Explain.
- Use five adjectives to describe yourself.

Interview Questions Pertaining to Social Justice Philosophy

- Tell us how you view poverty in this country. Why are some people living in poverty?
- Have you been involved in any prior social change activities? (Why or why not? Provide details)
- When you think about domestic violence programs, do you think of them as social service agencies or social change agencies, or as something else? (Please explain.)

Interview Questions for Supervisory Positions

- Describe an example of your leadership ability.
- Describe your supervisory style.
- What motivates employees?
- How do you motivate people you supervise?
- What do you find difficult in disciplining employees?
- What role does documentation serve in the disciplinary process?
- If two employees working for you clearly disliked each other, what would you do?

Interview Questions if the Job Entails Report or Grant Writing

- What prior experience have you had with grant writing? Report writing?
- What's the most difficult part of grant writing for you?
[obtain a writing sample from the candidate]

Interview Questions Pertaining to Values and Beliefs

- What experience have you had working with people from backgrounds and cultures different than your own? (tap into issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, politics, socioeconomic status, age, disability)
[Follow up the previous question with:] In this program we value diversity with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, age, disability, and culture.
- How comfortable or uncomfortable does that make you, and why?
- Tell me what you know about domestic abuse, and why you want to work here.

These questions are not an exhaustive list, but they are offered as options for you to choose from and build on. Questions about work style and personality traits should also be asked when doing reference checks (a critical step that should never be bypassed!). The main point here is that it is easier to teach someone about domestic violence than it is to teach them to be organized, dependable or strong communicators.

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Expand Recruitment Efforts

When thinking about the issue of hiring staff, it is also important to consider the

very related issues of recruitment protocols and outreach efforts. As domestic violence programs move more and more toward a “professionalization” of services

and demanding college degrees, they are excluding a pool of candidates from which they can hire. In this country many people are not afforded the opportunity

to obtain a college degree, yet their knowledge and experience would be ideal for your organization. Consider emphasizing experience over education wherever possible. Also, instead of focusing on putting job notices primarily on college campuses, in city newspapers and through professional social services organizations, consider expanding outreach efforts to social justice focused organizations, free community newspapers, radio stations, community-based grassroots agencies and university departments, such as Women’s Studies, African Studies, Political Science, and Community Organizing.

ACTION PLAN

Examine the composition of your staff to see how diverse they are with regard to race, ethnicity, religion, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability status, substance abuse history and experience as a survivor/victim of domestic violence. If you are less than happy with the distribution of your staff, make a serious commitment to improve upon this diversity. What hiring policies do you now have in place that specifically make it harder to do this? After you identify these policies, change them!

Cost of Staff Turnover

According to the American Management Association, the cost of losing an employee is approximately 30% of their annual salary. Stop and think about how many employees your program lost last year. Grab a calculator, estimate the average annual salary for those folks and multiply that by .30. This ends up being a huge cost to organizations, and we all know that our programs just can’t afford to lose this kind of money. Just consider that if three employees, all making approximately \$35,000 a year in wages and benefits, quit or are fired in a year, the cost to the program in lost productivity as well as staff time hiring and training new people comes to \$31,500. Clearly, high employee retention not only helps a program run more efficiently and successfully, but it makes sound financial sense, too.

Strategies for Staff Retention

So how do we retain staff of domestic violence programs? First, we assume it can be done. Many Executive Directors and program managers sincerely believe that high staff attrition is inevitable in domestic violence programs. They cite the low pay, emotionally demanding work and high stress of these jobs as factors that lead to high burnout and staff turnover. This expectation is so ingrained in many programs that little, if anything, is done to prevent such high turnover. Staff are treated as though they will leave (through inadequate

training, supervision and opportunity for advancement), and this then contributes to the high turnover. We need to break this cycle.

We cannot eliminate staff turnover, but there are a number of concrete things we can do to drastically reduce it. These strategies are broken down into five categories:

1. Competitive wages and benefits
2. Effective training and supervision
3. A supportive, enjoyable work environment
4. Challenging work
5. Room to grow and advance

Competitive wages and benefits

We may not be able to compete with some for-profit companies, but we need to be competitive at least with other nonprofits and with some government jobs that might attract our employees (e.g., child welfare offices, social services). If we are offering wages that are so low that our employees need to take on second jobs, we need to rethink our pay rate. Hiring fewer people at higher salaries might be an option, and/or combining two part-time positions into a full-time position is worth considering. Unfortunately, more and more companies are moving toward hiring part-time employees so they don't have to pay benefits, and this results in skyrocketing attrition. Seriously consider whether this tradeoff is fair to your staff and effective for your program.

It is worth mentioning that once you offer a livable wage, it is probably as or more important to offer attractive benefits than it is to keep raising the wage rate in your program. This doesn't just mean health and retirement benefits either – although these are certainly important – but also the job benefits that don't have to cost the program much money and work wonders toward employee satisfaction and retention. For instance, most employees of domestic violence programs are women, and women as a rule greatly appreciate having flexible schedules and understanding employers. Women with young children at home, for example, will put up with lower wages at their workplace if their employer lets them work at home when the children are sick, or understands about doctor appointments and teacher conferences occurring during business hours Monday through Friday. Many women will bend over backwards for an employer they know will understand if they need to take time off to get their car fixed, or take their mother to the store. Not that you would have a *carte blanche* policy regarding time off, but if you are willing to work with employees around life circumstances, they will generally reward you with incredible loyalty. After all, they know they aren't going to get that kind of support from most employers.*

ACTION PLAN

Examine your policy regarding flex time. How are employees treated now, and how could you improve your policies? Are you paying employees a livable wage? Examine your staffing decisions and pay rates to see where you could improve.