National Indian Health Board

When Staff Turnover Makes your Stomach Churn Over:
Risk Management Lessons from the Field

Question: I am new to the project, and it seems like there is always new staff coming in and other staff moving on. What can I do to lower all of our stress?

Answer: Staff turnover is going to happen. While there may be ways to address and improve retention, it is also important to manage the impact that shifting staff and responsibilities can have a project – particularly one that has regular contact with community members. Community members, especially those participating in projects that discuss sensitive topics like suicide or substance use, build rapport and trust with staff members, and that trust can be hindered when the staff members are frequently shifting or when new staff are introduced. These are some strategies that can be put into place to help minimize the effect of staff turnover.

Shadowing

Having staff shadow each other during project activities is a good way for staff to directly observe the other in action, and to learn how to perform certain tasks. This will also allow staff to openly introduce and acknowledge the other staff member to community members. Shadowing is not exactly training. It is more about observational learning then hands-on learning. A staff member sits in the background or off the side, generally in silence, to observe and take details notes on performance, interaction, style, and gain some insight into how to perform the task being observed. Shadowing can also be done at regular intervals with different staff members. Shadowing is a good practice for supervisors to use when seeking to evaluate performance, as well. But staff members can also shadow their supervisors to observe what goes on in management meetings or with calls with funders. It is a way to ensure that all staff members have at least minimal familiarity with the tasks of other team members.

Cross-Training

Formal cross-training takes shadowing one step further. This is where more than one staff member is trained to do the same task. The end result is that more than one staff member knows how to write grant reports, enter data into a spreadsheet, facilitate the group, present a Meth 101 educational session, etc. Should one staff member not be able to perform this task (for whatever reason), then another one is able to step in and complete the task with no lapse in service. Staff can be cross-training in various different ways, and shadowing can be a component of that. However, holding staff in-services, having staff train each other on tasks, having staff attend formal training events, and including staff cross-training as a listed job responsibility in a job description are all good practices to ensuring that knowledge is shared across team members.

Co-facilitation
Having staff co-facilitate project activities will assist with staff cross-training, as well as ease staff burden. Co-facilitation is the sharing of responsibilities of moving through some process – normally sharing the responsibilities of running a group session or conducting some project activity. The benefits of creating a co-facilitated project far outweigh the challenges. Co-facilitation can help to build a team synergy as team members look to each other to capitalize upon individual strengths. Co-facilitation also permits team members to work more closely together and rely upon each other. And of course, co-facilitation prevents one person from bearing too much responsibility and too much of the workload – and should that team member move on for any reason, the co-facilitator can more easily step in and perform his/her duties. Challenges include finding staff that meld well enough to effectively co-facilitate, allowing staff the time and space to create a co-facilitation relationship that works for them, and being prepared to intervene should any problems arise between co-facilitators. Supervisors will need to actively work with their project staff to identify proper facilitation pairs (or teams) and regularly check-in on the relationship.

Transitions
Since we have already admitted that staff transition will happen, supervisors should plan for it. A standardized transitional document that departing staff can complete and review with existing or incoming staff is a good tool to ensure that historical knowledge is not completely lost. Such a document should information on:

- Current activities
- Pending activities
- Challenges
- Contact information
- Timelines
- Resources
- Specific insight and guidance

And supervisors should mandate time during the final two weeks of any employee's tenure for mandatory team meetings, cross-training, introductions, file reviews, and the sharing of transitional document.

Documentation
Having your documents and files in a single place and ordered properly can help any new staff coming in to locate things quickly and can minimize the initial learning curve. So be sure that if any staff leaves, that he/she takes time to organize their files and then make sure those files are organized before any new person starts. Don't make a new person scream out loud on the first day when you show them piles of mismatched papers and unlabeled files laying around their new office.

Additional Resources

For more tips and resources on staff turnover, professional development and personnel management, feel free to visit these sites:

- http://www.personneltoday.com/hr/staff-turnover-are-employers-managing-it-correctly/
- http://www.imoberg.com/files/Unit_D_ch._24_--_Garet_et_al._article.pdf
- http://www.thenonprofittimes.com/management-tips/5-steps-for-effective-personnel-management/