

Turning the Tide: Transitioning from Volunteer to Paid Staff

by
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Introduction

Long Lake Caring (LLC) quickly became an important community asset during its first five years of existence. It grew from a small, informal group that provided winter coats to those in need to a registered 501(c)3 organization, open five days every week, providing used clothing to more than 1,000 families each year. As LLC grew, its cadre of volunteers expanded as well.

This growth caused the volunteer coordinator to voice his concerns about LLC's unsustainable model to the board of directors by telling them that by the end of the year, his position needed to become a paid position, or he would have to leave.

Organization Overview

LLC had humble beginnings. Three friends, each of whom attended a different church in the Long Lake area, noticed that young children at the local elementary school lacked adequate coats or hats to protect them from the harsh winter weather. Each woman convinced her church leaders to hold a Thanksgiving coat drive to provide coats for the children in need. Little did the women know that they would collect nearly 500 winter coats (along with hats and gloves) during the first coat drive, and they certainly had no idea how much work it would take to prepare the coats for distribution!

Fortunately, one of the church pastors led the women to a large multipurpose room where they categorized all the donations based on size and made preparations to distribute the coats. Each of the three women gathered groups of volunteers from her respective church to host the first Long Lake Coat Fair. In just one afternoon, all of the nearly 500 coats were claimed.

After the initial coat distribution, the volunteers from each church gathered to discuss the event. They noted the fact that Long Lake had long experienced an influx of migrant workers during the summer, hired to fill low-paying agricultural jobs in the surrounding region. In recent years, however, the migrant workers began to stay in the area year-round. In addition, the volunteers talked about the impact caused by the recent economic downturn — increasing the divide between the

“haves” and “have-nots.” Both of these factors contributed to the growing need for affordable clothing — beyond winter coats — in Long Lake. In short, the volunteers decided the community would benefit significantly from an organization that collected gently-used clothing for people in need. Thus, Long Lake Caring was born.

Organization Growth

During the first year, the teams of volunteers planned multiple clothing drives and distributions. Members of the community appreciated having a place to donate excess bedding and clothing, while people in need benefited from the quality, affordable items which helped them stretch their meager budgets to cover other necessary expenses. It was a win-win situation all around.

The second year of operation saw increased cooperation with local businesses. Lee Hopkins, one such entrepreneur, donated a small building just off the town’s main street. The original team of two dozen volunteers agreed to staff the building each Saturday for donation intake and distribution, while the building was also open to volunteers on Wednesdays in order to sort through clothing and hang it in its proper place. A sign-up sheet was posted in the kitchen of LLC for volunteers to indicate their availability to serve, and this very informal system seemed to work quite well for all involved. It was during this time of growth that one person from each of the three churches agreed to serve on the executive board of the organization, and papers were drawn up to officially register the group as a 501(c)3.

By the end of that second year, however, it became apparent that having the building open to volunteers just one day a week was not enough. Heavy traffic on Saturday mornings became the norm around the LLC building, and volunteers had to park blocks away in order to allow customers to use the facilities. In addition, the original group of volunteers was starting to grow weary, especially upon consideration of increased operating hours. A newer member of the volunteer team, Neil Henderson, agreed to become volunteer coordinator, an unpaid position. He was a recently retired banker who enjoyed volunteering at LLC, and he had a keen interest and background in organizational software. With his expertise he was able to supplement existing software to develop an easy-to-use volunteer registry, accessible to prospective volunteers online.

As demand for the organization's services grew, so did its need for volunteers. After just three years, LLC was open five days per week, utilizing more than 50 volunteers weekly in order to keep the doors open. Meanwhile, Neil continued to tweak the software system to make it more user-friendly. He also introduced both volunteer recruitment and retention programs to continue to attract the large numbers needed to ensure LLC remained a viable community organization. Volunteer training was added to the mix, and LLC was able to continue staffing the clothing closet five days per week with a trained, reliable network of support.

Volunteers or Paid Staff?

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After another full year of organizing volunteers, Neil's wife commented that he spent as much time at LLC as he had at his full-time job – except without a paycheck. What had begun as an enjoyable, part-time position to occupy spare time had turned into a full-time job that was a linchpin of the organization. Living on a retirement income was not as easy as Neil and his wife had hoped, but his demanding responsibilities at LLC had made looking for a part-time job nearly impossible. As LLC continued to grow and both in-kind and monetary donations had steadied, Neil wondered if there was room in the budget to pay him a stipend.

Neil voiced his concerns at the next LLC board meeting. He admitted that there were other people who also donated large amounts of time who were deserving of compensation, reminding the board of the dangers an all-volunteer staff can pose. He told them that as much as he loved organizing the volunteers, if his position was not paid by the beginning of the next fiscal year, he would be forced to step down.

The board was stunned. Never before had they discussed or considered hiring a paid staff. They had always been an entirely volunteer-run organization and the organization's success using that model was substantial. Nevertheless, the board recognized the gravity of Neil's proposal, and would need to soon discern whether LLC had outgrown its all-volunteer model. Deliberation continued during the next several board meetings. Most board members conceded that the organization had reached a pivotal point where it needed to begin offering compensation to those in key positions, if it was to continue to grow. A few others, however, remained firm in their belief that the organization could move ahead with an all-volunteer staff. They suggested perhaps it was time to find another person to fill the volunteer coordinator position so that Neil could find a paid position elsewhere.

The tide was turning and LLC had to decide what to do next. Choosing to hire a paid staff, even a small one, would be a big commitment for Long Lake Caring with serious implications for the young organization's future.

Questions and Instructions

1. Please identify and discuss some factors that should be considered when a nonprofit transitions from a volunteer to a paid staff.
2. How should the board of directors determine which LLC jobs become paid positions? Please explain your response.
3. From a human resources management perspective, what steps should be taken by the board of directors as they transition from a volunteer to paid employment model.
4. The organization currently has no stable source of funding, although the annual budget is sound. What does the board of directors need to do to ensure the level of funding required to cover salaries? Please explain your response.
5. Please identify and discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks of a volunteer staff.
6. At the end of the case, some board members were in favor of transitioning to paid staff while others wanted to retain the volunteer model. Based on the information available, which option do you think is best for the organization? Please justify your response.

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Name:

Case Log and Administrative Journal Entry

This case analysis and learning assessment is printed on perforated pages and may be removed from the book for evaluation purposes.

Case Analysis:

Major case concepts and theories identified:

What is the relevance of the concepts, theories, ideas and techniques presented in the case to that of public management?

Facts — what do we know *for sure* about the case? Please list.

Who is involved in the case (people, departments, agencies, units, etc.)? Were the problems of an “intra/interagency” nature? Be specific.

Are there any rules, laws, regulations or standard operating procedures identified in the case study that might limit decision-making? If so, what are they?

Are there any clues presented in the case as to the major actor’s interests, needs, motivations and personalities? If so, please list them.

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Learning Assessment:

What do the administrative theories presented in this case mean to you as an administrator?

How can this learning be put to use outside the classroom? Are there any problems you envision during the implementation phase?

Several possible courses of action were identified during the class discussion. Which action was considered to be most practical by the group? Which was deemed most feasible? Based on your personal experience, did the group reach a conclusion that was desirable, feasible, and practical? Please explain why or why not.

Did the group reach a decision that would solve the problem on a short-term or long-term basis? Please explain.

What could you have done to receive more learning value from this case?