

Show Me . . . the Participation!

by Ruth McCambridge

“Most of us have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people. There’s nothing I would enjoy more than a job that was so meaningful to me that I brought it home.”

Editors’ note: *This adapted article was originally published in the Fall 2003 issue of the Nonprofit Quarterly. Five years have passed, but many of the article’s original findings concerning workplace engagement continue to hold true.*

In 1974, social documentarian Studs Terkel published *Working*.¹ The core insights in the massive collection of interviews with ordinary people ring as true today as they ever did. In Terkel’s words, the book is a monument to workers’ continuing “search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short for a life instead of a Monday through Friday sort of dying.” This is where the concept of “worthwhile work” begins.

Among the most critical issues for nonprofit managers is the recruitment and retention of good staff. In related discussions, we often express concern about our inability to “compete” in terms of salary, benefits, and even career path. No one can discount these factors, certainly; but is salary the major factor we should worry about, or, as the research suggests, is the central issue for workers having meaningful work?

Research on the for-profit and the nonprofit sectors suggests that nonprofits might do well to consider *other* workplace characteristics for real answers to concerns about attracting and

retaining staff—and satisfying organizational mission. We like information that goes straight to the source, asking workers directly what they value in their workplaces. And apparently, over the past 26 years, that answer has changed little.²

Norah Watson, an editor in a large publishing concern, was interviewed in Terkel’s *Working*. “I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job,” she says. “Most of us have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people. There’s nothing I would enjoy more than a job that was so meaningful to me that I brought it home.”

Nonprofits are all about meaning. We are organized around higher purposes—our missions—and we employ those who have their own deeply felt missions that they hope to live out within our organizations. Nonprofits should be the ideal workplaces for those like Watson who want their work to have meaning—to be worthwhile.

But is Watson unusual? Is she the rare altruist in a larger population of workers willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder? Research suggests not—even in the commercial sector where profit is presumably paramount.

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What Is Worthwhile Work In Nonprofits?

In focus groups with nonprofit employees who were asked to discuss their desired workplace characteristics, participants consistently cite the list detailed below.

Mission and meaning. An employee's belief in the purpose of the organization and its ability to serve constituents is vital. Further, workers need to understand the direct connection between their work and organizational mission. And finally, employees need to be recognized for their contribution. By its nature, our sector attracts those with a strong sense of personal mission. Job choices are thus about finding the "fit" between their mission and vision and that of an organization.

Respect for constituents. Because talented employees are mission and results focused, they want direct evidence that what they do matters to constituents. If what constituents want isn't reflected in the end result, most mission- and results-oriented staff question the status quo. If the workplace lacks a culture that supports this kind of questioning and tries to shut it down, talented employees will either leave or create havoc. Organizations need to ask: Do employees have enough direct contact with constituents to see the end result of their work?

Organizational premium on continuous learning and creativity. Most of us work in environments in which the elements are continuously in flux, where the social, political, technological, and economic environment changes regularly. Talented staff members keep up with these changes and have an incentive to look for answers. They share their ideas, and they look at their own mistakes for their learning potential. The sense of excitement that results from a constantly learning workforce creates real engagement in the work. In organizations in which everyone works toward the best possible result, less-motivated or engaged staff tend to fall away.

Employees have a stake in the future. Nonprofit employees want to be included not only in critical decisions that are of immediate consequence

in their own work, but also in decisions about the future. This invests workers in the success of the organization and exhibits a measure of confidence in their value, skill, and intentions.

Information is clear; standards are consistent. In too many organizations, employees do not have access to critical information that enables them to make responsible decisions about their work. This results in dependence. No talented and motivated employee will stand for being infantilized for long.

Additionally, employees are excruciatingly aware of inconsistencies in the application of standards. This does not mean that you must fine-tune all your rules and enforce them unstintingly. To the contrary, to the greatest extent possible, employees must be a part of standard making.

Mutual respect, collegiality, and fun. Talented people like to work where they know they are respected and where their working relationships are productive and friendly. No truly talented person thrives in a workplace where he feels threatened or shut down by organizational culture. Atmospheres that include dishonesty, petty jealousies, and gossip argue against open contributions to the whole. This does not mean that conflict is bad—it is vitally necessary for learning and growth—but it does mean that sneakiness and unfettered individualism will eventually shut down and drive out your best folk.

Authentic forms of acknowledgement. Employees want to believe that their efforts are appreciated and acknowledged. Overly constructed exercises such as employee recognition programs don't work half as well as immediate, real feedback when we have exceeded expectations or even just hung in through a difficult stretch. Environments in which acknowledgement comes naturally have a whole different feel from those that recognize employees sparingly or in an overly contrived way.

What Workers Want

American workers want more of a say, influence, participation, voice—call it what you will—at the workplace than they now have.

To update the picture, researchers Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers report in their book *What Workers Want*³ on what workers long for in their workplaces. Through focus groups and more than 2,400 phone interviews, they found that "American workers want more of a say, influence, participation, voice—call it what you will—at the workplace than they now have." These workers believed that it was primarily management resistance that blocked their influence in the workplace. This type of resistance spans all sectors. The study revealed that

workers long for a new "institutional form" that promotes cooperative and equal relations between workers and management in decision making.

"The basic message to decision-makers is clear," state the authors. "A huge opportunity exists for America to increase the representation and participation of workers at their jobs and thereby to improve the quality of working life. Political leaders will find potential votes for such reforms; unions will find scores of potential members; business will find a better and more loyal work force."

Workers from All Sectors Want Meaningful Work

In his book on engagement in the workplace, Tom Terez reports on the results of focus groups and interviews with hundreds of people from all walks of life about which factors made work meaningful.⁴ While the study highlights a total of 22 factors contributing to a meaningful workplace, the five most often cited were the following:

- **Purpose.** The mission of an organization must have a larger purpose—something beyond producing goods or services or even being the best. Employees want to feel instinctively that their work makes a positive difference.
- **Ownership.** Employees want to take part in shaping how their work is done.
- **Fit.** When employees know how they and their work fit into an organization's larger mission, they are more willing to put forth their best effort.
- **Oneness.** When there is a shared sense that everyone is in it together, working relationships are more collaborative.
- **Relationship building.** The workplace offers ways to build healthy interpersonal relationships that foster institutional loyalty and loyalty among team members.

Additional Benefits of an Engaged Workplace

There are more reasons to provide the kinds of spirit and intellect-engaging workplaces workers want. In the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Pat McLagan noted that research indicates productivity and customer satisfaction are much higher in participatory organizations.⁵ When our human resource practices do not fully use the creative capacity of staff to do their best for our constituents, people don't receive the quality and responsive service that they expect from public-benefit organizations, and public faith is destroyed.

Additionally, significant research suggests that there is a "positive correlation between effective workplace participation and increased community activism. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that there is a direct relationship between workplace decision making and community participation."⁶ In other words, the benefits of adopting more participatory practices reach far beyond the immediate needs of a given workplace and extend to the sector's larger intention of promoting greater civic engagement.

If the arguments cited in this article about workplace engagement are right, nonprofits' values-rich identity should make the third sector the workplace of choice for all kinds of workers. We have mission and purpose at our core, we value the participation and engagement of our staff and constituents highly, we believe in equity and in each person having a voice, and we want to encourage fairness and collaboration—or do we?

In his classic 1992 article "When Management Is the Message,"⁷ Thomas Jeavons suggested that nonprofits are legitimately held to higher ethical standards than commercial or government sectors. But at the same time, nonprofits' credibility has been easily eroded by what an interviewee described as "an incredible double standard between . . . the way they want society to be in the external world and what they are willing to tolerate for their own staff."

We would do well to consider carefully the steps that we can take to create the places in which we all long to work and to consider the barriers that stand in the way of our attracting and retaining staff with talent and commitment.

ENDNOTES

1. Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.
2. Deborah S. Hildebrand, "Does More Money Mean More Work?" Suite 101 Web site (http://job-satisfaction.suite101.com/article.cfm/does_more_money_mean_more_work), July 11, 2008.
3. Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers. *What Workers Want*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999 (updated in 2006).
4. Tom Terez, *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*. Holbrook: Adams Media, 2000.
5. Pat McLagan, "The World of Work," the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 3, Winter 2003.
6. See Peter Lazes of "Project for a Working Democracy," New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, December 2000, p. 3.
7. Thomas Jeavons, "When Management Is the Message: Relating Values to Management Practice in Nonprofit Organizations," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 403–421.

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