Episode 17: Smart HR in Small Nonprofits

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This is a transcript of Nancy Bacon and Sarah Brooks talking about human resources on the Nonprofit Radio Show podcast. You can listen [here](#) or however you prefer to listen to podcasts.

Nancy Bacon

Hello, and welcome to the Nonprofit Radio Show-- a podcast with tips and tools for small nonprofits. If you feel in the dark about how to run a nonprofit sunshine is on its way. I'm Nancy Bacon. And I'm joined by Sarah Brooks.

Sarah Brooks

And today we have a special guest. Skye Mercer is here with us to talk about smart HR for small nonprofit organizations. So important for every nonprofit organization, whether you're all volunteer or have a staff, to think about how you care for your people. People make your mission come to life, and people are your biggest asset. Caring for them responsibly, ethically, legally and strategically, is central to meeting your mission.

Nancy

I'm so glad we're talking about this because you know, I've heard so many people talk about how to manage people remotely, how to work with people who, you know, how to hire people in these crazy COVID times, there's so many HR questions that are coming up right now. And this is a perfect topic for us to tackle. I know that the vast majority of nonprofits are all volunteer. So you might be thinking, you know what, we don't have staff, I don't need to listen to this one. I'm going to just skip over this one and wait for the next episode. But I hope you listen anyway. I hope you listen anyway, because we have a whole lot of people in our world. And these HR practices relate to volunteers as well. So knowing good practice, whether you have staff or volunteers is really important. We owe our volunteers the same kind of feedback and support that we give our staff members. You know, it's also good to keep an eye on the horizon that your organization may grow or change. So all of a sudden, you may need to know this stuff about staff, and, and HR and all that. So let's help you get ready.

Sarah

I am thrilled that we're talking about this, Nancy, and in my organization, I'm sort of the one person or if we're really honest, the like quarter person, HR staff member. And I will admit that it is the part of my job that most often overwhelms me, I feel the least prepared. And the most sense of responsibility toward those co-workers. When you work in a small nonprofit organization, you know everybody-- they're real people, and interacting with them then gets a little complex when you are both an HR staff person and the person sitting next to them in a very tiny office. Throw in a pandemic and what it means to go from working together to working remotely or being a frontline worker and the stress that goes with that, and wow, being an HR person these days is hard. That's why we're so excited to have Skye Mercer here with us today. She is a virtual HR consultant working with nonprofit organizations throughout the country. I've heard her speak before. She's excellent. And I can't wait to learn from her. Thanks for being here, Skye.

Skye Mercer

Thank you for having me, Sarah. And Nancy, I'm excited to talk with you today.

Sarah

Nice. Well, at the nonprofit radio show, we always like to start with why. Help us think through: why is it worth my time to get HR right? There are, after all, 42 other things on fire on my plate in my small nonprofit organization.

Sarah

Absolutely. Yeah, it's such a good question and a lot of the nonprofit leaders that I work with sound very similar to what you're going through Sarah, in that they are in charge of all the things-- they're in charge of finance, in charge of donors, in charge of the programs, all of it. And HR can be really complex, and it can be really challenging. And the reason it's so important, you know, to the point that you all made in the introduction, is the people that support our mission in-house, the people that are doing the work, the volunteers, the employees, they are 100% the reason we exist, I think that sometimes we, we think, okay, we're here to serve a need in the community, which is so true, so important. But without our employees without our volunteers, we cannot serve our clients. And so, I, I feel wholeheartedly that employees and volunteers are the backbone, the heart, the center of all nonprofit work.

Sarah

Isn't it true? I mean, I feel like how we approach our co-workers, as employees makes a huge difference in our ability to meet a mission. I've worked in organizations where that relationship has been rather dysfunctional or neglected, most of all, and I've worked in organizations where people have taken great care with it. So, it's not just that it's important, because these are people we like, but it's it's really important to making our mission happen. That what you're seeing too?

Skye

Right, yeah, if you think back to a nonprofit where you've worked, where there was great treatment of the staff, where they were treated well with regard to, you know, pay and or benefit,s workplace flexibility, living the core values within the HR work or within how volunteers and employees are treated. And you think about the work that they were doing in the community, there was less likely to be burnout, there was less likely to be issues with, with serving clients, because people were coming from a place of strength. And then you think to the other nonprofits you've worked with, unfortunately, that, where that doesn't exist, the staff are not treated with the core values. They're not treated with respect or inclusion. And it absolutely negatively impacts the mission, and the work that's done in the community. And you know, folks in the nonprofit arena, there in, in my experience, the, the burnout is, can come easily, especially if they're not only dealing with the stress of working in a field with clients where burnout is high anyway, but then they don't have the support of the leadership, and they're not treated with those core values in the work that they're doing and how it can be really detrimental to the overall success of the nonprofit.

Sarah

Well, and it's so interesting, right? If you work for a nonprofit organization, that is working, for example, to eradicate poverty, and yet the employees at that organization are not making a living wage--it's a really hard disconnect for nonprofit organizations and for those employees to wrestle with that disconnect. So, it's important, I think, for boards, volunteer organizations, also to think about how do our HR practices match the very mission, the very vision that we have for our community? Are we doing it ourselves first?

Skye

Yeah, I'm glad you said that. And, you know, I hope it's not an unpopular point of view. But I really subscribe to the idea that nonprofits need to be small and mighty. And what I mean by that is that before we go out and expand programs, we have to make sure that we can take

care of the compensation, benefits, workplace flexibility of our employees--that is, what is going to lead to the overall sustainability of the program. And so, before hiring people, I think it's incumbent upon nonprofits to ensure that their processes are, you know, nearing 100% efficiency, so that it is as efficient as possible, so that we truly know when we need to hire full time staff, so that we don't end up in a situation where majority of staff are not being taken care of. And then they're expected to take care of clients as well.

Sarah

Yeah, for sure. You know, HR, of course, seems even more challenging than usual, right now, I'm sure you're busier than ever, with the pandemic forcing so many of us to work from home or in some sort of hybrid situation, or some in an office, that is a more stressful place, because they're a frontline employee now. And one of the biggest things I'm seeing in the small, non nonprofit organizations around me is an impact on staff morale. People used to feel in the loop about everything, they used to get a boost of energy from seeing their work actually happening in the community, which is a little harder to see from the zoom screen. And they used to like interacting with their co-workers. So, what are some tangible steps small nonprofits can take to boost morale right now?

Skye

Yeah, absolutely. So, I want to give a shout out to all of the frontline volunteers and employees who are currently in the facilities serving clients. And I want to give a shout out to the people who are new to working from home, some are dealing with, you know, taking care of children, and schooling and all of those things. So just like a collective thank you to all of the nonprofit and volunteers and employees. And it's such a good question. And it's something that I work with my clients on is really developing that culture of engagement and culture of communication, virtually, with our employees and volunteers. And we basically have to think about our daily touchpoints and our daily interactions with staff and volunteers in a different light. And so, some of the things I'm seeing organizations do are really cool. You know, daily check ins, walking meetings on the phone, where they just check in for 15 to 30 minutes -- doesn't have to be zoom. In fact, I'm seeing some organizations put into place, no meetings Wednesday to kind of protect the time of their staff and deal with the zoom fatigue that volunteers and staff may be feeling. And then you know, their neat little tools that have come up, like virtual co-working. So, for people who really do well with having a connection with someone else, even if it's just they're sitting in the cube next to them while they're working, virtual co-working is a great way to get together online and on purpose with some goals and action items to, to create an environment where you're not alone. And so, I have a virtual co-working guide on my website that folks can download. And that's definitely a tool that I'm seeing. So, increase in communication and engagement. You know, I'm seeing some

organizations do some great things for the holidays to sending gifts to the home, and then having a virtual holiday party, virtual Secret Santa, all these cool things that leaders are coming up with to keep their volunteers and employees engaged,

Sarah

I definitely want to check out the virtual co working. I, I so missed that just sort of momentary informal chatter, you know, you hang up the phone, and you say, "well, that was a hard one." And then someone gives you two minutes of, you know, support, or, or you get to laugh together about something great, that just happened. So, it's cool to think of how you might mimic that, I guess, or replicate that online. It's a really neat idea, I'm looking forward to checking that out. I've also been thinking a little bit as someone who supervises people about how to share feedback with employees during this unusual time. And in my office, we were literally on top of each other, in a very tiny little space. And so feedback can be very casual, right? It's something could happen. And I could figure out how to make a comment about, oh, you handled that so well, like thank you for being really specific with them about what they could do next, or, you know, give that kind of positive reinforcement because I just overheard something or offer a suggestion for how something could be thought of differently in the future. I can't do that now. We're literally miles apart. And I don't know what's happening. And I'm also very aware that some people are thriving, right now. They're actually feeling more productive than ever because it's quiet. And they don't overhear every conversation and people aren't coming in the front door. So they're getting their work done. And other people are really struggling, trying to figure out where's my to do list, I don't even know where to start. So, what's the best way to both give feedback to an employee, but also to listen to them and hear what they need? So that as a supervisor, I'm, you know, giving the extra help when they need it and letting them be when they don't?

Skye

That's such a great question, Sarah. And it as you know, it's our responsibility as leaders to set up the systems and these processes to make it easy for us to have consistent communication with our employees and volunteers so that we are getting that feedback regularly. So especially in situations where the team was right next to each other all day long, that maybe having that 15-minute check-in in the morning is a great idea. And one of the things, one of my favorite questions. It's actually from Marcus Buckingham. He's an awesome author. And he used to work at the Gallup poll, and he talks about the important questions for your staff on a regular basis or volunteers is, what are you working on? And how can I support you? So it's just like, what's going on? How can I support you? And it's such an important question. And because then when those things come up, like, Hey, I had this really successful interaction with a client or with a donor, to then have that moment that opportunity to say, Wow, awesome, that's

really well done. And so you know, the other things that I'm seeing people do for kind of those positive boosts is mailing cards to people's homes. I don't know about you, but when I get snail mail, it's like, my favorite thing in the world. And so, and then, of course, the messaging systems that you're intimating toward, that, you know, they're sending an email or a message of great job on this. When it comes to that more challenging feedback, what I would say to leaders, like, if you need to give challenging feedback to someone remotely, whether it's a volunteer employee is to embrace the discomfort, embrace the challenge of doing, so it's going to feel uncomfortable the first few times. But do it anyway, because it is really important that feedback is timely, especially if it's something to help the person improve. And the thing that's really like, it's kind of intuitive, but I would just like extra emphasize it is make sure that the video is on when it is challenging feedback, even if the person or you have to call in from the zoom app on your phone. It's better to see each other when delivering kind of challenging direction or feedback than it is to do it on the phone. And then you know, if you are doing things like your performance evaluations, like the actual you know, sit down with the form and everything, is to make sure that employees are given a heads up, you know, could be in volunteers too. It could be, you know, hey, we are going to be doing our employee performance evaluations this year online, it's going to look a little different -- videos have to be on, you know, here's what's going to take place. What are your thoughts? What's your feedback on that, you know, giving everyone a heads up, that it's going to be happening and what it will look like. And then, of course, scheduling the meeting and treating it as you would if you were in the office.

Sarah

You know, I heard a great example the other day from someone who had to have a sort of challenging conversation with something and an incident had occurred, it needed to be addressed. And then the supervisor said, okay, you know, Nancy, we need to talk about this. We're gonna set up a time for zoom. But prior to talking about it, I want you to answer these questions for me, and and I'll answer them too. And they each had these very open-ended questions that gave the employee an opportunity to reflect themselves, and also acknowledge what else might be going on that, you know, got to this point. And it was, she said, the conversation then was so much more open and free, and both sides felt like they had had time to respond and think through what they wanted to actually say. And I think in this virtual world, that is extra important, since it is a more awkward social interaction, to feel like you're confident in what you want to be able to convey back and forth is really quite helpful.

Skye

Yeah, what a wonderful example. And it sounds like their relationship is really based on trust, which is just the foundation for any healthy supervisor, employer volunteer relationship, but

then it's like, you know, a million times more important when we're leading people over video to have that trust, to have the ability to say, Hey, here's what I'm going to be thinking about prior to our conversation. Here's some questions for you to think about. What a beautiful working relationship and an awesome example. I love that.

Sarah

Well, and I was just like, okay, we need to do that all the time. I understand why it is especially important right now. But, but what a great way to have a sort of thoughtful conversation after something happens. That also respects the other person has a perspective on what just occurred. And that may add value to the conversation. Yeah. All right. It's December, many nonprofits have been thinking already about budgets for 2021. What are some important things you're seeing organizations think through in this relatively uncertain time for funding?

Skye

Sure, yeah. So the biggest things that come to my mind from an HR perspective, are going to be okay, how are we going to handle employee training, employee pay, employee benefits? You know, there's a couple of strategies to think about, because we know funding is always uncertain in the nonprofit world, but especially in December of 2020. I've seen some organizations forego pay increases this year, I think I recently saw a projection that said, obviously, all organizations are looking, or over half of organizations are looking at lower pay increases this year. And then a lot of organizations are opting for bonuses. The one-time payout bonus, of course, as a employee advocate, just makes my heart hurt, because I'm like, you know, the cost of living did that, you know, I'm curious to see how the CPI ends up like, you know, it just, it's, it's hard. But, you know, in terms of funding nonprofits, and Nancy Bacon and I have talked about this, you know, one of the things that I think is critical for funders to understand is that nonprofits need to be able to pay for overhead, and that sometimes, private donations are not going to cover that. And, in fact, most of the time, and so I think negotiating, talking with funders about overhead, possibilities of using funding, of course, not locking yourself into anything that is going to be harmful for the future financial sustainability of the organization, but really starting to have those conversations with funders of -- we so love that you're giving us money. But goodness, you know, we can't devote 100% of this grant, you know, to clients, we have to be able to buy a chair for the employee to sit in. And I mean, that's an extreme example. But I do, I do hear, hear about that then negotiating with funders and talking with them about the needs of the staff and about the needs of the organization. And then, you know, I'm seeing some other things where, you know, organizations are deciding not to go back into brick and mortar buildings. Now, that's not possible for everyone. But, you know, if they don't have a ton of people walking in, or in-person client facing work, they're deciding to invest maybe in a co-working space. So, they're saving a lot overhead that way and of course, doesn't

make sense for everyone. But it's a, it's a big money saver for a lot of organizations. The other thing that I feel is really important if you do have employees is talking, making sure you have a good benefits consultant and talking with them about possibly getting a pass on any sort of health insurance increases this year. Delta Dental, recently gave a pass to certain contract clients, like hey, we're not gonna, we're not gonna raise rates here. And so that, that's amazing when that happens. And I think it's something that nonprofits shouldn't be afraid to ask for. Because financial sustainability is everything.

Sarah

But what I love about your thoughts there on budgeting is, they're all related to being bold as an organization. So, don't just assume you have to take the health insurance rates given to you, don't just assume you have to accept the very restricted gift giving from a, you know, grant. Ask. Say and advocate for your organization and the importance of your mission. That is a great reminder for all of us going into 2021. Alright, my last question, I like to think that here on the Nonprofit Radio Show, we're trying to give everyone that magic wand to help them see something in a new light. So, I want to give you our magic wand. And it's got one wish in it, only one. And so, if you could use that magic one to, what do you wish for each nonprofit out there listening to the nonprofit radio show for their HR needs in the coming year?

Skye

I wish for them to know that you don't have to be an expert in everything. It's not possible. And so, a lot of the Executive Directors I work with, they do an excellent job, leaning on their resources and supports. One of my favorite leaders I've ever worked for, I just talked to him last week, used to always say to me Skye, use your resources. And I'd say okay, what does that mean? He's like, who do you know, who can help you? And so with HR, by no means are you expected to be this, like employment law compliance experts and this expert in employee engagement. Use your resources, whether it's a volunteer on the board of directors, whether it's hiring an outside consultant like myself, whether it's relying on volunteers, the help of volunteers that have backgrounds in this this type of field work. I think that would be my magic one wish is for nonprofits to know they're not alone when it comes to HR.

Sarah

That's a great one.

Nancy

I love that too. I think it's so true that we have so many resources that we don't...We tend to think in a scarcity mindset. We don't tend to think that I actually have so much around me that I can draw from, it's awesome. One of the reasons why I love talking with Skye about HR issues is because she always starts the conversation with values, listening, inclusion, lifting up the people around us, and that always just read re-establishes in my heart that we know what we're doing, that we are stronger together. And when we're connected, we can really make great stuff happen. I really appreciate this notion that when we work so hard to do the work, that we need to pay attention to who is doing the work. And that, that, that matters just as much as the work itself. I really appreciate this notion that we model the values we are working for in our community, within our organizations itself. I think Sarah, you talked about we can't, we can't address poverty outside in our community if we're not looking at poverty or, or lack of resources inside our organization. I really think that that's important. So, so, let's get to our Word of the Week. Sarah, what's our word of the week this week?

Sarah

Well, it has to be values, right? You can't do any of these human resources questions, you can't answer any of them without being really clear about what your organization values and I am resolute that in 2021, I'm going to make every HR decision through the lens of what is it our organization says we value? And given that, how then would I approach this situation? You know, HR situations are often challenging. And if you go back to what you know, and what you believe in as an organization, it can help make that conversation a little bit easier. What do you think of when we say the word values, Nancy?

Nancy

Well, you know, I think our loyal listeners will not be surprised that we landed on values and I think values is a really interesting word. So, in most cases, when you add an s to a noun, you make that noun plural, right? Like one flower, two flowers, one tree, two trees. But I started to stare at these words and these words value and values are not related in that way. Values is not the plural of value. Value is all about worth-- monetary, non-monetary, I looked it up in the dictionary. And it's all about like, you know, the price tag you would put on something. But values are important lasting beliefs. And I stared at those two words for a long time. And I realized, you know, when we're talking about HR, these words are linked. Your values are demonstrated through what you value. So, when you value your people and spend time thinking about how best to support them, you show your values. And that really got me thinking about how we can do a better job thinking about what we value, and then linking that to our values. And that was a really like, I need to spend more time thinking about that. Yeah, that was awesome. Skye, what do you think about it?

Skye

Yeah, so um, I love that idea. I had the privilege to work with an organization, a nonprofit, that their, their core values that they used in their services with clients were infiltrated, they were infused in every aspect of human resources. They were in the performance evaluation, here's our values. There was a graphic that was posted all over the offices and the cubes, that was the graphic of the organization's values, there was the, you know, welcome guide and orientation had the graphic of the values. And they talked about values at team meetings. And, you know, how are we showing each other respect? How is our organization displaying diversity. And as a small business owner, I am truly a proponent of values-driven human resources. And I operate with six core values, but I'll share three of them. Forward Thinking is so.. it's a value I... forward thinking HR is critical. In my world, HR does not have to be this is the way we've always done things. I really feel like modern, up to date, HR policies and processes are going to attract and retain the best volunteers and employees. And then inclusivity is paramount in our world. Our differences deserve to be respected, especially at work. Diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces are the most successful workplaces. And, you know, the other thing that's so important to me is, is being purpose-driven, you know, I want to do good in this world, and so do my clients. And so we're both really on the same page, and that we're passionate about what we do. And we want to make sure we're doing the right thing all at all times the right thing for our employees, volunteers and for our clients.

Nancy

That's so awesome. I love that idea of being purpose-driven, which I, which is what we all are, that's what we do in this work, right? Well, Skye has a ton of resources on her website, which we'll link to in our show notes. Take a minute to download her virtual co-working e-guide if you're interested in that topic or work from home compliance guide. So, there's just so much out there to support you, as Skye reminded us. There are resources, find your resources, right?

Sarah

Yeah, thank you so much Skye, you've been a wonderful gift to me as a practitioner. And I'm sure to lots of our listeners. You've given us a lot to think about, and a lot to hold in our hearts and in our heads as we go forward in, in this uncertain time. And whatever comes next we stick true to our values. You know, I think every listener to the Nonprofit Radio Show knows and believes that people matter. Take the time, these next few weeks to check in with your employees. Model good practice yourself, pause and tell your people they matter. I love that Skye suggestions aren't rocket science and they aren't expensive. Sending a card to an employee to say, hey, you did a great job--it actually matters. Sometimes I think we make it too

complicated. Sometimes it's just really simple. Listen, find a way to laugh together, and try to be hopeful about the future and know that together, you've got this.

Nancy

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