

# CLIMBING

## the Ladder

Advancing your career in the humane field

BY ROB BLIZARD

Carter Luke, now the president of the Massachusetts SPCA in Boston, started his sheltering management career back in the 1970s, a world away, at a rural Wisconsin animal shelter. An elementary school teacher at the time, he was drafted in as a shelter manager because he lived on a farm and “knew a little bit about a lot of different kinds of animals.”

“I got my feet wet and my hands dirty fast. Very wet, very dirty, and very fast,” he laughs. “That dedicated, hardworking group of people taught me a lot about shelter management that’s still useful decades later ... as the leader of an organization with 500 employees and a \$60 million budget.”

Luke went on to become a leader in the animal welfare field, an inspiration to many. But his experience of being recruited into the field because of hands-on animal experience on a farm was unusual even back then, and virtually impossible to envision now. Animal shelters have come a long way, largely due to the ever-increasing experience and qualifica-

tions of the folks who run them. If you want to make a lifelong career of sheltering, if you plan to climb the ladder from scooping poop and walking dogs to guiding the direction of an agency or organization, it’s not enough to simply love animals.

No one recognizes this better than Luke himself, who’s made it a point to keep learning throughout his career. In this era, he says, those who have ambitions to become the animal welfare leaders of the future have “got to prepare themselves with knowledge, skills, and experiences in the huge array of disciplines that they will inevitably have to navigate.”

But how? So many people come into this field almost by accident, drawn in by the odd “Help Wanted” ad, an animal they were moved to rescue, or a volunteer job they imagined might fill might fill some empty hours. Many get hooked, but figuring out how to turn a passion into a real vocation is tricky. Successfully moving into a higher position in the animal sheltering business requires enriching one’s background and strategizing for the ideal jump.

### Take a Skill Pill

Jane Luiso, who has worked on numerous searches for chief executives at humane organizations during the last seven years as a principal at Chicago-based search firm Kittleman

& Associates, explains the background that her agency tends to look for.

“The three areas most people need in their mix of career skills are budget oversight, staff management, and development experience,” she says. “Also, having worked directly with a board of directors is a big plus.” Most of the people who make the big leaps into managerial positions at shelters, Luiso explains, are those who have experience “overseeing staff members and, most of all, raising money. Many development directors are elevated into the top slot because they have had the chance to work with board members and to know what really works with bringing in revenue.”

Experienced executive directors suggest that obtaining additional key skills can help candidates market themselves when searching for a new job.

“CEOs need a broad base of skills and talents,” says Alice Calabrese, president and CEO of the Humane Society at Lollypop Farm in Fairport, N.Y. “Probably the most important skill is [knowing] how to hire correctly, so that one is surrounded with an expert leadership team that can be trusted to do their jobs.”

A good shelter director will be a jack-of-all-trades and a master of many. A savvy sense of marketing is crucial for someone who plans to serve as the face and voice of an animal shelter, says Steve McNall, president and CEO of the Pasadena Humane Society & SPCA in California, as is the ability to work with boards of directors, civic leaders, and support staff. “Finance and budgeting knowledge is critical to a leader’s fiduciary role. And certain shelter-specific skills should not be forgotten, such as knowing everything from the workings of the drainage systems to animal care programs.”

Some necessary skills won't appear on your résumé, but will help an ambitious candidate thrive in the animal sheltering field. "Leaders in our industry must be personally resilient and not easily cowed by challenges," says Lisa LaFontaine, president and CEO of the Washington Humane Society in D.C. "Also, they need to know how to pace and take care of themselves so that they avoid burnout, as well as how to manage boundaries between work and personal lives."

McNall agrees that good character is important. "Over the years, I have seen numerous people move up to the top slot," he says. "What propelled them upward were honesty, integrity, and creativity. ... Animal sheltering has unique challenges and can be an emotionally charged profession. The leaders of the organization must be extremely truthful and sincere because if they are not, everyone will see and feel it."

### Back to School—Sort Of

If a top role at a shelter is your goal, you'd do well to focus on building your skills in financial management and development, says LaFontaine. "Much of the lead executive's role involves high-level fundraising and, of course, most animal welfare organizations have financial challenges. Knowing how to generate revenue and, even more importantly, manage budgets are critical skills."

Education on these topics can be found in the classroom, but also online. "Listserves are a great way to stay at home and network at the same time," Calabrese says. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA) "both have great listserves allowing people to trade ideas."

You may even be able to get education within your own organization. "Ask for more responsibility in budgeting, fundraising, and staff management," says Luiso. "Ask for additional education, whether it be a graduate degree or continuing education at conferences."

The animal care community provides any number of training opportunities, but Luke also suggests that shelter staff not limit themselves solely to those. Join groups of leaders at nonprofits outside the animal sheltering community, he suggests—for example, he's attended management seminars sponsored and organized by the United Way, including a recent workshop on changes to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990 that is required of all charities.

The conferences and programs presented by large national organizations—such as The HSUS's annual Animal Care Expo and the degree programs offered by Humane Society University, the conferences and workshops offered by SAWA and other animal welfare organizations—are ideal places to pick up field-specific knowledge, Luke says. All have been "incredibly strong forces" in the animal sheltering business. "They can

help shelter employees continually upgrade their management skill set—an ongoing effort on which any shelter manager wishing to advance should concentrate."

Looming like an industry beacon above all of these educational options, however, is the Certified Animal Welfare Administrator (C.A.W.A.) designation offered by SAWA. The certification was launched in 2004 to provide a distinguishing credential for top managers in the animal sheltering world. The designation acknowledges skill, experience, and awareness of industry best practices; it is a tool meant to signal a significant leadership background to the public and employers. Obtaining the certificate requires passing a 100-question test, which contains questions on topics ranging from animal care to public relations. Even sitting for the exam requires both supervisory and managerial experience in an animal sheltering environment.

"The C.A.W.A. credential is to animal welfare what a C.P.A. is to accounting," says Calabrese. "It establishes a benchmark of competency, experience and knowledge. Furthermore, it isn't granted easily and requires considerable effort and expertise, thus setting those who possess the credential apart from their colleagues. In the future, I believe the C.A.W.A. credential will be seen as a requirement on more and more job postings."

Luiso agrees: "The C.A.W.A. is becoming more recognized as *the* credential in the field. And it will become more valuable as more people attempt to attain this designation."

### People Who Really Need People

Luke learned early in his career that managing an animal shelter does not just mean managing the care of animals. It also means managing the care of people—the staff, the board, the donors, and the general public.

Pointing out that "society" is the only shared word in the two most common terms for animal shelters—"Humane Society" and "Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals"—Luke notes that a humane organization is not contained within the four walls of the bricks-and-mortar shelter. Ideally, it is a community force, and in order to be an effective one, its leaders need to hone their interpersonal skills.



Running shelters is as much about assisting people as it is about assisting animals, says Jan McHugh-Smith, president of the San Francisco SPCA. "I think it is critical to have strong people skills because we work with a wide variety of personalities and viewpoints. We cannot help animals if we cannot relate to human beings."

To help gain perspectives on assisting different constituencies in a community, McNall suggests reaching out. "Be active in the community," he urges. "Service club participation such as Rotary, Lions, or Kiwanis clubs offer great networking for the individual, and your organization can benefit from the participation."

For shelter directors and managers, relating well to others is only the beginning. Knowing how to lead and manage staff is a subset of that main skill, and it's a task that can take a huge percentage of any leader's time. Developing managerial skills is crucial for those interested in rising within an organization.

"Supervisory skills are immeasurably critical to leadership positions," McHugh-Smith says. "Leaders and potential leaders need to learn about motivating people, identifying strengths and weaknesses in order to appropriately delegate duties, and evaluating performance. Many classes teach these fundamentals, but succeeding at them requires practice, practice, practice."

"People will probably not last long in an executive role without staff management skills," LaFontaine warns. "Being a good leader of people—someone who inspires, motivates and challenges, as well as nurtures—is absolutely essential to attaining the uppermost positions."

Taking the time to manage one's staff well can have all sorts of benefits for those workers seeking career growth, according to Luke.

"If you want to move into the top spot of an animal shelter, you have to help the people you manage to be better managers of their own staffs. Doing so," he says, "will mean that you will more likely achieve your business goals and, as a result, that you will enhance your reputation within the organization itself and in the industry."

Luke suggests that the most successful leaders make people around them better through a constructive, positive presence and management style. Leaders, Luke says, "must help [staff] ... see the big picture with a long-term perspective while also being able to lead on a day-to-day basis. Folks who succeed also operate coolly and with minimal drama."

### **Saying Just the Right Thing— and Knowing When to Listen**

Providing that long-term perspective—to shelter staff and to the community at large—requires a high level of communication skills. A shelter director needs to write well and also be able to speak eloquently to the media.

Leaders should place special emphasis on learning to be a public spokesperson, according to McHugh-Smith. Communications experience, she says, "is more critical than ever before, because animal stories make the news, and you must be ready. As the leader, you are the face of the organization."

To enhance one's written communications, Luke suggests reading the newsletters of other nonprofits, studying their strategies and picking up good ideas. Luke himself belongs to more than two dozen organizations and makes it a point to review the materials he receives from them.

Speaking and writing well are only the most active forms of communication. Two overlooked aspects—the ability to listen, and the sense to know when to shut up—will also serve a future shelter director well!

"You must be a careful listener to be successful in the animal sheltering profession," McNall says. "You have to listen to employees—especially the line staff who are your chief ambassadors. They know what is going on in the kennel environment. Listening to donors is mandatory so you know where their interests are. And, of course, one must listen to the board of directors and take advantage of their expertise."

Having strong communication skills also means knowing when to zip it, says Luke, especially about what you convey to others in the field.

"We claim to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. But people in our business should learn that sometimes the most valuable thing they can say is nothing, even if solely for their own self-preservation," Luke says. "The animal sheltering community can be a very small world. ... People who want to make it to the top should never bad-mouth an organization, including one they have left. They should never burn bridges. Such actions can come back to haunt people—especially when done in writing on blogs or Internet postings. Also, people can develop reputations for being whiners and complainers, which certainly does not help them."

Even the newest shelter worker can probably think of someone who did not heed that advice—and may no longer be around to talk about it.

### **It's a Small World**

The business world is full of multinational corporations spending millions to protect and enhance their brands, encouraging consumer esteem and purchasing. Experts recommend similar branding strategies for animal sheltering professionals who want to advance. You may not be able to take out an ad on a Times Square billboard—but that's OK. For better or for worse, you probably don't have to.

"Reputation does count," says McHugh-Smith. "I've seen a trend with organizations hiring people from outside the industry who have demonstrated strong busi-

## How Can I Advance my Animal Sheltering Career?

Short and sweet keys from industry leaders

### **Alice Calabrese, president and CEO, Humane Society at Lollypop Farm (N.Y.):**

- Network with animal welfare professionals outside your organization.
- Share your goals with your supervisor.
- Participate in SAWA as a member and sign up for committee work.

### **Lisa LaFontaine, president and CEO, Washington (D.C.) Humane Society:**

- Build strong relationships and develop mutual loyalty with colleagues in your own organization and others.
- Be proactive about the initiatives or projects that most need to be addressed in your region. Volunteer to lead the initiative, then build a coalition and do so to the best of your ability.
- Gain experience in three of the most challenging and significant aspects of the role of the lead executive: development, financial management, and leadership of people.

### **Carter Luke, president and CEO, Massachusetts SPCA**

- Be a constructive, positive person.
- Practice humility and never stop learning or respecting others.
- Participate in coalitions, networking opportunities, conferences, and workshops to enhance skills and meet people.

### **Jan McHugh-Smith, president, San Francisco SPCA:**

- Take the C.A.W.A. exam.
- Be proactive by getting involved with your local federation or coalition.
- Take on a project from start to finish that will provide significant benefit to your organization. Incorporate a goal that can be measured.

### **Steve McNall, president and CEO of the Pasadena (Calif.) Humane Society & SPCA:**

- Take direction well, be interested, and learn by doing.
- Stay informed at all times. Understand each department's challenges, goals and objectives.
- Be creative—the animal sheltering profession needs individuals who are innovators in marketing, shelter design, and operations.

ness, management, and fundraising skills. This trend makes it even more important for up-and-coming leadership to project a proper image within the movement."

Your "brand" has a lot to do with how you treat others, Calabrese suggests: "The old adage of being nice to people on your way up applies. Image and a good reputation are paramount to advancing in the field."

As part of constructing a personal brand, advancement seekers should pay attention to how they depart old positions. Luke says that stories of people leaving on a bad note make the rounds in the industry; questionable behavior can tarnish reputations. A sheltering professional should always be conscious of her or his reputation, he stresses. "It can matter as much, or even more, than how strong a resume is or how well someone can interview."

"Animal sheltering is a very small world," confirms Luiso. "Everyone knows each other. ... The way you leave your former organization is vital. So are the references you can get from that employer; they will be important to the next organization."

If you're moving from one job to another, try to do so on a high note, Luke suggests. "It helps when one leaves a trail of success by departing agencies when they are well and strong. Too many departures while failing builds a bad resume," he says, and leaving a previous employer in the lurch can have a bad effect, too. "People should always leave their past positions well and responsibly," he says, noting that he once was asked to start a new position in three weeks. He negotiated a later start date because he knew that departing so quickly would have had negative effects on his employer at the time.

### **Seek Professional Help**

If you've moved into middle management at your shelter but haven't heard headhunters knocking at your door, you might consider a more proactive approach to these job-search firms. "In animal welfare, it's definitely to one's advantage to work with a firm," says Calabrese, noting that her shelter used one the last two times it filled the CEO position. "A number of them are active in our field. They stay attuned to changes in the field and know key players. The knowledge that these recruiters have is an invaluable tool for people who want to move up or around in animal welfare."

McHugh-Smith agrees, again as a result of firsthand experience: "I worked with a search firm that was hired by the San Francisco SPCA in 2007 to recruit candidates for the president's position. It is smart to develop relationships with firms to keep current on job turnover in the industry. Also, it helps to know the status of the labor market when looking to fill your own key positions and to understand the market demands to retain your own staff by staying competitive on salaries and benefits."

LaFontaine, however, is not completely sold on the value of schmoozing professional recruiters. Many humane organizations, she notes, form search committees comprised of board members and human resources executives from the community. "I think that developing relationships with colleagues and leaders in the field is much more useful to career advancement than a relationship with a search firm," she says.

Those colleagues and leaders can be helpful as mentors as well, and those getting their feet wet in the field would do well to find experienced colleagues who can show them the ropes. "A mentor is valuable in many aspects, such as giving direct feedback on performance, providing direction and encouragement, and identifying blind spots," explains McHugh-Smith. "I was lucky to have several mentors early in my career; they had a tremendous impact on me. They helped me out during difficult times by providing sound advice and support. They tell you things that are difficult to hear, but which make you a better leader."

And it doesn't have to be just one person, either: Learn the best approaches from the people you admire. "There are people who know the waters and can help steer you through your career path," says Calabrese. "I prefer to think in terms of a personal board of directors and not just a single mentor."

### With a Little Help from My Friends

Involvement in coalitions and professional networks can greatly enhance one's opportunities for career growth.

Luke extols the career benefits of actively participating in coalitions—a lesson he learned decades ago in the federation of humane societies in his native Wisconsin, when he first met then-HSUS president John Hoyt. Participation in coalitions benefits both animals and shelters, says Luke—and it benefited his career as well. "I realized a long time ago that I benefit from ... social interaction with other directors as well as from the formal sessions of a conference," he says. "This networking really has helped me in my career, because when I moved on to larger, different communities and organizations, I found that I already knew a lot about the community and the people working in it."

## Resources

For further information on how to transition into animal welfare from another field, and on the pros and cons of job-hopping, see our online supplements:

[animalsheltering.org/giantleap](http://animalsheltering.org/giantleap)  
[animalsheltering.org/jobhopping](http://animalsheltering.org/jobhopping)

What's more, attendees just never know what advancement opportunities they may come across at conferences. "I'm always looking for talent when I go to one of these meetings," Luke shares. "Always!"

Social opportunities at national conferences provide access to the expertise of shelter management and to those in the know about job openings, according to McNall. "I think the most valuable tool available for anyone interested in advancing their animal sheltering career is networking," he says. "I have witnessed many individuals obtaining pertinent animal sheltering information by meeting with their peers and others during break-out sessions, after conference hours, and—let's face it—in the local pub!"

Networking doesn't just happen at conferences, Calabrese says—you can develop access to expertise by offering your own, as a volunteer on the board of national or state animal welfare groups. "We all should help to advance the profession and the cause. But volunteering is also a good way for job seekers to get to know other organizations and people, take a leadership position, and establish a reputation in the field," she says. "People who want to advance should join and take a volunteer position in the National Federation [of Humane Societies] or in SAWA. That's where the leaders in the field are, and that's where we'll find the future generation of animal welfare leaders."

LaFontaine says a regional federation provided her with mentoring and learning opportunities, and also helped establish regional dialogues on spay/neuter, animal transports, and legislative initiatives. She served on volunteer boards for state and regional federations—an experience she calls "one of the best things I did for my animal welfare career."

Her involvement allowed her to better understand the challenges and realities of animal welfare organizations of a different size, scope, or focus from her own, she says. Most importantly, she adds, she developed relationships with colleagues—people she could turn to for support and work with on regional initiatives.

"Networks help many people in the field succeed, but also ultimately help more animals by resolving some issues behind pet overpopulation, abuse, and homelessness," LaFontaine says. "If you can advance your own career through such efforts, that is, quite simply, icing on the cake." **AS**

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