

How Healthy Is Your Shelter?

Don't be afraid to find out—it will help more animals in the long run

BY NANCY LAWSON

On those days when 50 more kittens have arrived at your doorstep and some guy is screaming at you for fining him \$25 for letting his dog roam, you might wonder why you stay in this field. Wouldn't it be easier, you ask yourself, to take a desk job that lets you leave at 5 p.m. and doesn't haunt your mind long after you've gone home?

Maybe. But it turns out the grass may not be greener in the business world. The things that drive people crazy in shelters are surprisingly similar to those that drive them crazy at IBM and other corporate monoliths, says Steven Rogelberg, Ph.D., an organizational science and psychology professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte.

With fellow professor Charlie Reeve, Ph.D., Rogelberg launched a study of the effect of euthanasia five years ago, expecting it to be an all-consuming factor in the overall morale and mental health of shelter employees. "It turned out that [problems with] teamwork, management, training, communication, and support issues emerged as essential factors," he says. "Euthanasia involvement was very important too, but it wasn't like the holy grail of importance. It does not trump all those other factors." When a shelter is managed well, "the impact of euthanasia can be buffered to a certain extent," says Rogelberg.

With that in mind, Rogelberg and Reeve worked with The Humane Society of the United States to develop the Shelter Diagnostic System, an assessment tool and process designed to help organizations improve operations based on the feedback of employees. By surveying staff anonymously about communications, training, supervision, teamwork, resources, and other issues, the SDS gleans a wealth of information that helps UNC Charlotte staff identify what's working well and what isn't. Follow-up tools include a summary report and analysis of survey results, a feedback guide, and a visit by a trained professional

who can help interpret the data and discuss next steps.

The simple act of collecting input can lead to a meaningful conversation with employees, says Rogelberg, and coming up with a plan demonstrates to staff that managers are committed to positive change. "Even if an assessment identifies 10 organizational growth areas, you only deal with the top two," he says. "You don't try to change things overnight. But just by picking a few things and focusing on them, taking small steps, it's incredible how it positively affects all other issues."

"People sometimes are concerned about using the SDS because they fear bad things will be found," he says. "But as soon as management says, 'We'd like to hear your ideas; here's some ideas we have,' employees will start ascribing all kinds of positive characteristics to management. But if management doesn't do anything, then employees just keep thinking about the negative features of the work environment."

It would be foolish to think everything is perfect in any organization, says Sandy Christiansen, president and CEO of the Spartanburg Humane Society in Spartanburg, S.C. Earlier this year, Christiansen signed his shelter up for an

SDS assessment during a time of major changes that included the addition of a humane education program, a full-time volunteer coordinator, and a behavior trainer. During the growth phase, senior managers didn't want to forget about the "nuts and bolts" of their operations or neglect the input of employees, Christiansen says.

"Quite frankly, I can ask questions, and a lot of times I'm sure I'm getting answers people think I want to hear," he says. "Or if somebody knows what my opinions are beforehand, they're going to decide if it's worth disagreeing. We have open lines of communication, but that doesn't mean that people are going to say the same things they would say if they feel like they can do it anonymously."

When SDS surveys arrive at a participating shelter, managers hand them out to employees, but employees mail them directly back to UNC Charlotte. Anonymity is guaranteed; the summary report includes employee feedback in general terms so no one can be identified. That's one of the features that attracted Sacramento Animal Care Services Manager Hector Cazares to the program. When he sensed problems within the hierarchy of his organization,



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he decided that "if you want to know the truth, you need to make sure that people have the ability to tell the truth without fear of retribution."

One of Cazares' former bosses used to say, "If you can't define it, you can't manage it." Requesting a top-to-bottom analysis of his organization was a way of defining the problems within—and Cazares wasn't afraid to face whatever outcomes came his way. "You're not going to get everyone to love you, and that should never be your goal anyway," he says. "So I think it's healthy to get impartial observations about yourself. And basically, if it's left in your hands, what are you going to do with it? It's a test of a good manager. You take criticism and you try to respond to it and correct it."

The process led to a constructive response from staff at the Spartanburg shelter, Christiansen reports. "Rather than receiving feedback that was startling or negative, the results helped to clarify areas where I already suspected improvements were needed," he says. "I also learned more about what staff think is working well, which I hadn't expected."

Through the SDS assessments, managers can measure employee health against "norms"—or averages of the results gleaned from the nearly 20 organizations nationwide that have used the system so far. These external benchmarks allow people to see how employee satisfaction with salaries, teamwork, job duties, communication, and other issues compares to employee satisfaction with those elements of working life at other organizations.

The bottom line, says Rogelberg, is that organizations trying to do good for animals need to do right by their employees as well. If they don't care about their staff, "they're ultimately letting the animals down in that employee potential and well-being is being compromised," he says. **AS**

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