Burnout in the Non-Profit Sector: How a Heart Monitor Became a Wake-Up Call for the Management Team at GLAAD

> "In nonprofits, everything feels important. And it IS important. What if that client doesn't get in front of the judge? She could be homeless. What if the suicide hotline is not sufficiently staffed? On a scale of 1 to 10... all decisions feel like 10"
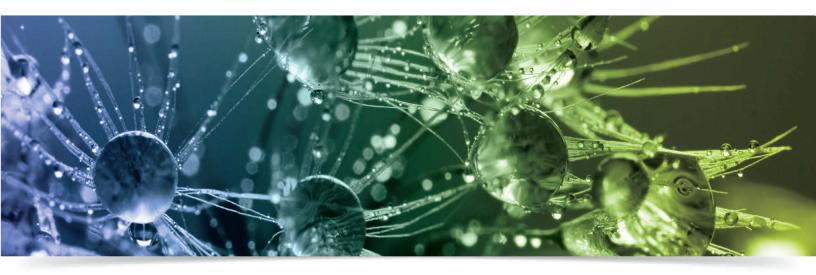>
> – Joan Garry, Consultant, former CEO of GLAAD

It's no surprise that non-profits have higher turnover than nearly every other business sector. Employees are underpaid, overworked, and lack flexibility in their schedules. These conditions quickly lead to burnout, which explains why the average non-profit turnover rate is at 19% (in other words, nearly 1 in 5 employees quit their job each year).[1] Joan Garry, former CEO of GLAAD, is familiar with this problem on a personal level. It was a lesson she learned the hard way when her Development Director came to a meeting in Chicago sporting a heart monitor.[2]

THE PROBLEM

Early in her tenure at GLAAD, Julie Anderson found out there wasn't enough money in the bank to make payroll. As the Development Director this was her responsibility, and she was determined not to let down Joan (her boss), the board, staff, community, and the entire world (or so it seemed).[3] Anderson began an overworked campaign to raise funds as fast as she could, answering emails at 4 AM, juggling inquiries, ideas, and strategies. In the middle of this rush, one of Julie's co-workers, the Director of Annual Giving in New York, confided in her that he dreaded turning on his computer each morning. Julie was suffering too. She began experiencing intermittent heart palpitations that were becoming stronger and more frequent. She ignored the signs for as long as she could, but eventually she was forced to see a doctor who immediately ordered her to wear a heart monitor.

WHAT **HAPPENED**

Long story short, Julie made it through that meeting in Chicago and recovered her full health. In her boss, Joan's words, "Julie was OK. More than OK - she was a full participant in the meeting and did a great job. But she never should have been there. She looked absolutely horrible and I'm sure the Board thought I was stark raving mad for having her there."[2] A few years and multiple career changes later, Julie Anderson is now a clinical psychologist and Joan Gary is a non-profit consultant and coach.[2] Both are applying the lessons they learned to support others navigating personal well-being and the challenges associated with working in the non-profit industry. And just in case you're wondering what happened to GLAAD, not only did they meet their payroll needs, they are still a thriving non-profit organization that is rewriting the script for LGBTQ acceptance around the world.

HOW **THEY GOT THERE**

Julie's heart-monitor provided a much-needed wake-up call for both her and Joan. After that meeting, Julie began asking for what she needed, such as a personal day, a working computer, or help with a problem. For her team, Julie had everyone create a self-care plan and reminded them of the importance of recharging and reconnecting with life outside of work. She also made an effort to lead by example, taking vacation time, exercising regularly, and turning her phone off whenever possible. But the impact extended beyond Julie's department. GLAAD's upper management team began talking about how to celebrate successes, acknowledge each other, and take time to reorient on why they joined the organization in the first place. Out of these development efforts, staff retreats were born, and Julie reflects on these as some of her fondest memories at the organization.[3]

GLAAD's response to employee burnout highlights a relationship that has been replicated across multiple studies in industrial-organizational psychology: investing in employee well-being and development significantly reduces feelings of burnout.[4] This demonstrates the value of a robust succession planning process, which provides employees with ongoing opportunities to develop their skills, access coaching and other supports, and consider their future with the organization

CHALLENGES **IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR**

There are a few challenges present in the non-profit industry that make it more likely for employees to experience burnout and contribute to higher turnover rates:[6] First, non-profit leaders have less authority and control than their for-profit counterparts, and yet they often have to report to a larger number of stakeholders. Non-profits also tend to lack straightforward performance measures, because it is difficult to quantify and measure social change. Despite this barrier, non-profits are subject to greater scrutiny from politicians, press, and donors who demand to see impact. Finally, compared to for-profit organizations, non-profits are often underfunded, understaffed, under-resourced, and undertrained. Under these conditions, it's no wonder that burnout is a common and turnover is high. Further, when vacancies in critical roles are sudden, the ones who remain are left to scramble in order to fulfill those responsibilities. As a result, non-profits often find themselves stuck in a positive feedback loop where overworked employees leave organizations, creating more overworked employees who may eventually leave too. For this reason, proactive succession planning and preventative employee development are perhaps most important for teams working the non-profit industry.

FUN **FACTS ABOUT NON-PROFITS**[7]

- The non-profit sector contributed nearly $900 billion to the U.S. Economy last year (about 5% of the GDP)

- Over 25% of the U.S. population volunteers with a non-profit each year

- Public charities are the largest category of 30 types of non-profits (in the U.S. there are over 950,000 different organizations ranging from arts, culture, education, and healthcare)

- Disproportionate heavy giving happens in December, especially in the last 5 days of each year, resulting in an uneven revenue spread that can make it difficult to balance operating budgets

- Organizations related to education and religion receive about 50% of all non-profit donations each year

KEY **TAKEAWAYS**

1. **MONITOR TURNOVER** Turnover is a great indicator of burnout, especially in the non-profit industry. Keep an eye on how quickly employees are leaving your organization and use exit interviews as an opportunity to honestly ask them why they've decided to leave. Even better, put measures in place to ensure your people don't get to this point. It is the responsibility organizational leaders to not only monitor but prevent turnover. This will save you money, not to mention time, energy, and morale that is taken from other staff and projects when teams are constantly changing.

2. **CREATE A CULTURE OF SUSTAINABLE WORK** Julie's heart monitor helped both her and Joan realize the importance of working sustainably. Joan now encourages everyone to "take vacations – each and every day you are entitled to,"[2] and she takes time to prioritize for her staff. "Not everything is a 10... If you yourself think most things are a 10, it's only moments before you are online ordering your own heart monitor."[2] Take the time to develop strong succession planning and employee development processes. This will do a great deal to prevent disengagement and turnover, and will prepare your organization for smooth transition when non-burnout related vacancies occur.

3. **LEAD BY EXAMPLE** Julie made great changes in how she managed GLAAD's Development team, but her staff would not have implemented their self-care plans if Julie hadn't led by example. Corporate culture cannot exist only as a statement in an employee handbook, it must be embodied by employees, and by management most of all. Leaders set the standard for work ethic and expectations. Therefore, it's important that leaders not only work to prevent burnout for their followers, but model healthy habits for preventing burnout for themselves.

ABOUT **GLAAD**

GLAAD is a non-profit organization whose mission is to rewrite the script for LGBTQ acceptance. GLAAD was founded in 1985 in New York, in response to defamatory and sensationalized HIV and AIDs coverage in the New York Post. Since then, the organization has spent over 30 years leading the conversation and shaping media narratives on LGBTQ issues. GLAAD works primarily through entertainment, news, and digital media to share stories that accelerate acceptance. The organization also has a variety of engagement programs, networks, and ally activists.[5]

HOW **SIGMA CAN HELP**

Like GLAAD, you can build a culture of sustainability and work-life balance at your organization. This will help you to significantly improve the health, morale, and productivity of your team. One of the most useful tools for supporting your employees in this way is a robust succession planning process. Succession planning enables ongoing employee development and builds an internal talent pool to support current staff and prepare future leaders. This can significantly reduce turnover and alleviate strain when routine vacancies arise. SIGMA provides full-service succession planning, custom consulting, and a range of templates and resources that can help you build these processes. We also offer a number of succession planning workshops. To learn more about our solutions, click here, or contact us directly for more information. ■

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