



UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Attract To Retain:

Understanding the factors of retention to help create an effective retention plan in social service organizations.

by

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Abstract

Employees leave organizations for all sorts of reasons. Some find a different job, some go back to school, and some move out of town. Others retire, get angry about something and decide to quit, or realized the position was not for them and did not enjoy it at all. All those examples represent turnover, but they do not have the same organizational implications. There are many different factors that lead to turnover and low retention rates and it slowly becomes problematic for any social service organization. As more and more people find themselves seeking the help through the services of nonprofits it is clear that nonprofit organizations must find a way to retain already trained employees. Retention of qualified employees is becoming a challenge for nonprofit agencies providing human services around the country. Low wages, heavy caseloads and not enough support from the leadership team are causing employee dissatisfaction, and in turn, increased turnover.

Creating strategies are great, but what good does it do for an organization to be great at strategies while employees continue to leave their positions often without knowing the reason why? What good does it do for a nonprofit to get all the grants ever in the world while they can barely limp through the day because everybody in the building wants desperately to leave? This research project explores the factors that impact positively and negatively retention rates in social service organizations to achieve their mission. A qualitative method was used and semi-structured interviews including a focus group were conducted with a Nevada nonprofit staff and leaders to identify the most effective strategies that could be implemented by nonprofit organizations to retain employees. The following are findings, implications, and suggestions gained from the literature and a qualitative analysis of interview and focus group data.

Acknowledgments

I want to take this opportunity to dedicate this research project to those individuals who work hard every single day in the field of social services and who have been called to the nonprofit workfield to make change in this world. They choose to get up each day and advocate for good no matter the tough situation. Thanks to your hard work, dedication and vision these organizations exist. I have been in your position myself and no matter the circumstances, I enjoyed serving my community each and every single day. Always remember that your work matters, one hug, one phone call, or one home visit makes a huge impact in someone's life.

I would also like to thank my family who supported me along the way of my Master's program journey. As well as the faculty from the Master of Nonprofit Administration at the University of San Francisco for giving me the opportunity to be part of the best cohort. With special thanks to Dr. Richard Waters for all the support and patience he gave all of us until the end. Thank you.

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Section 1. Introduction

There are many types and sizes of organizations and they often have more differences than similarities. However, one factor is essentially shared by all: for the sustained success of the organization it is not the only key to attract the best and most talented employees but it is equally vital to retain them (Munn, 2018). Nonprofit agencies providing human services have relied on the organization's mission to recruit and retain employees (Allan, 2008). These organizations believe that employees who are aware of their mission and have a passion for the cause are those who will remain longer in their positions. An organization's mission is critical to retaining employees, but it does not stop someone from leaving.

The demands for more accountability and proof of program results are placing more pressure on these employees. Many other factors follow turnover and is slowly becoming a big issue that nonprofits are not addressing. "The work is difficult and physically and emotionally demanding. It is low paying and offers few opportunities for career advancement" (Leon & Marcotte, 2001). Stress and burnout leads employees to set aside their desire to help others and instead pursue other positions with better pay and less stress. The loss of employees can affect an agency in many different ways. Not only in productivity, but also the loss of services that are being provided to the community. Let's not forget the recruitment and training of new employees that can cost thousands of dollars (Leon & Marcotte, 2001).

Nonprofits need to start investing in the issue of retention and finding new strategies that will allow them to retain talent. In order to do so they first have to understand the factors of turnover within their organization. This will allow them to foster a positive organizational culture and find ways to keep their employees longer. An organization that attracts talent will often have a better chance at success because of work quality and better services. (Munn, 2018). One of the challenges that face many social service organizations is the lack of effective employee strategies that assist in retaining employees that are indispensable and are working towards the organization's goals. Exploring the factors that are currently impacting the retention rates in the

sector is the first step into finding a solution. Organizations want employees to stay longer and in order to do so, they need to learn the reasons that are making them leave in the first place.

Working in a nonprofit requires more than a connection with the mission and the values and nonprofit leaders need to make sure the environment in which they work in breeds high performance, retention and engagement.”When an employee is engaged, that employee is typically more satisfied, more productive, and less likely to leave the employer to seek other employment” (Knocks, 2011). It is important for organizations to take responsibility and engage their employees by ensuring the workplace meets employee’s needs. Whether these needs are internal, such as the need for challenging and meaningful work, or external such as the need for benefits and healthcare. Focusing on what makes employees happy and valued will allow nonprofits to learn what factors have the ability to change or improve. Overall, increasing employee engagement not only benefits individual organizations by increasing retention, but also individual employees and the communities that these organizations serve.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this research is to explore the factors that impact retention rates in social service organizations to achieve their mission, positively and negatively.

“Attention given to employee retention may result in lower organizational costs and increased organizational performance” (Munn, 2018). Employee retention is an essential part of strategic leadership as it assists the organization to better achieve its mission. Therefore, keeping talented individuals that have a high desire to help others and are well trained, is important to ultimately create value within the community. “Sometimes the greatest barrier to an organization’s success is the level of talent the organization attracts and its ability to retain them” (Munn, 2018). People want to be treated with respect and feel the value of their work. Since nonprofits do not offer the highest compensation in the job market in order to attract and retain the quality of talent they need to succeed, finding other strategies may be extremely valuable.

Research Questions:

RQ1. Why do social services organizations have such high turnover rates?

RQ2. What Strategies are nonprofit leaders using in order to retain their employees longer?

RQ3: Are nonprofits fostering an environment that breeds high performance, retention and engagement?

Section 2: Literature Review

In the nonprofit sector most organizations rely on their mission to recruit and retain their employees. The sector creates an assumption that employees who are aware of the organization's mission, and have a passion for the cause are more likely to remain with the organization longer. Most of the time, this is not the case and employees have many other reasons on why they decide to stay or leave. An organization's mission is critical to retaining employees because it "helps define an organization, expressing its values and envisioning its future simply and clearly. Often the mission statement attracts clients, donors, employees and volunteers to an organization" (Brown & Yoskioka, 2003).

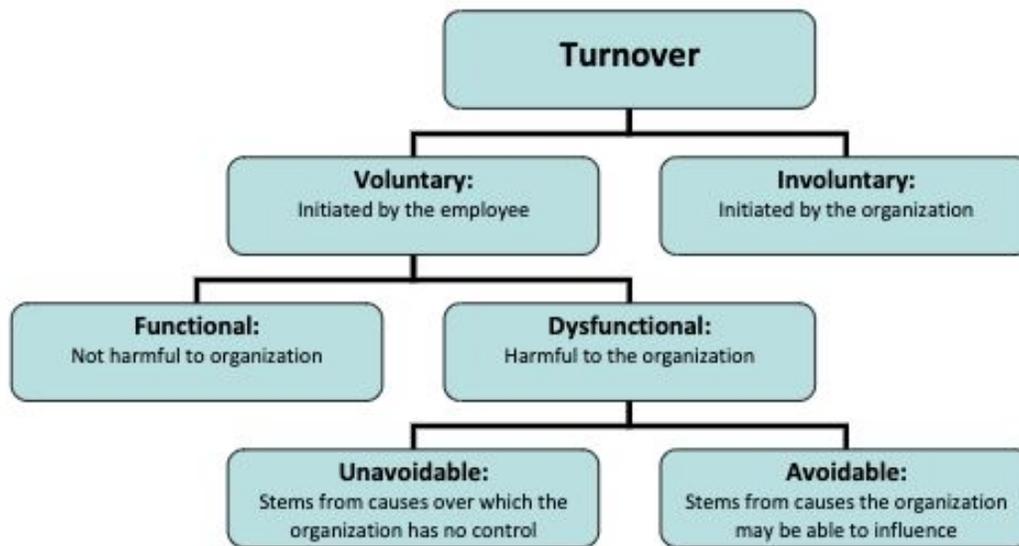
But even with a strong sense of values and mission, nonprofits are reaching a state of crisis with their turnover rates. The loss of employees can bring in so many different consequences for the organization such as loss of money, time, services and productivity from the employees that are still there as their workload gets bigger. Overall I believe that in order to keep qualified and committed employees, nonprofits need to find ways to maintain an environment where employees feel valued, supported and happy to fulfill their mission.

Factors on high turnover rates

Retention of qualified employees is becoming a problem everywhere in the work field and not just in the nonprofit sector. It is becoming more of a challenge in social services organizations around the United States. Working in a field with heavy caseloads, low pay, and emotional depletion, causes an increase in turnover. Research shows that “nonprofits have higher annual employee turnover than government businesses; 3.1 percent compared to 2.7 percent in the business sector and 1 percent in the government sector” (Gazley, 2009).

Staff turnover that can occur in any organization might be either voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary turnover refers to termination initiated by employees while involuntary turnover is the one in which an employee has no choice in the termination as it might be due to long term sickness, death, moving overseas, or employer-initiated termination (Allen, 2008).

Figure 1.1 Framework of Staff Turnover



Retrieved from: Allen, D. G. (2008). Retaining talent: A guide to analyzing and managing employee turnover. *SHRM Foundation Effective Practice Guidelines Series*, 1-43.

Figure 1.1 shows the distinction in turnover between voluntary and involuntary. As explained above, voluntary turnover is initiated by the employer and involuntary is initiated by the organization. For the purpose of this research, I will focus on voluntary turnover. In order to know how to manage voluntary turnover, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of why employees leave or stay with organizations in general. It is also important to create strategies to help manage turnover among valued workers.

According to the UST (2015) Nonprofit Employee Engagement and Retention Report the highest indicators for job satisfaction and the top reasons why employees leave were as follows:

Reasons for staying

1. Strong affinity for the organization's mission or purpose
2. Culture or workplace environment
3. Flexibility/work-life balance
4. Sense of purpose in their work
5. Benefits and/or perks

Reasons for leaving

1. Not a good culture/office environment.
2. Hiring the wrong people
3. Low compensation
4. Workload and stress
5. No job advancement or growth opportunity
6. Lack of communication with leaders

There are several reasons and factors that create a high turnover rate in the nonprofit sector other than pay and the amount of workload. A recent study pointed out trends between employee engagement and turnover rates and found that compensation, communication, culture, and hiring practices are the top factors in retention. (Phillips & Hernandez, 2018).

Compensation continues to be one of the top factors due to the sector being one of the lowest paying jobs. “Low compensation and high workloads are leading employees to set aside their desire to make a difference by fulfilling the organization’s mission” (Phillips & Hernandez, 2018). Human services workers in direct care are an essential piece of any organization, and yet they rank amongst the lowest paid workers in the nation. They perform some of the most difficult services by providing the best direct service care as possible.

A direct service employee can help a mother reunite with their children, whether a youth is released from the juvenile detention center, or whether a low income family is able to receive the resources needed to provide food and clothing for their children (Allen, 2008). These jobs are extremely stressful and emotionally draining that require high levels of compassion. Unfortunately, this does not mean their performance is equal to their pay. According to a study done by Walden University “social services pays its workers less than any other sector that hires similarly qualified people for similar jobs and consistently ranks among the five-worst-paying professional jobs for men and women tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics” (Parker, 2018).

Apart from the rate of compensation, the hiring process and recruitment are also a high factor. Vacant positions may be easy to fill, but with reduced chances of obtaining qualified candidates. Without the proper recruitment process the hiring of long term professionals becomes a bit harder (Allen, 2008). Last but not least, communication and culture, these are both factors causing high turnover rates. Relationships are at the center of employee engagement. As stated by Kim and Lee, “If people haven’t built meaningful relationships at work, they have little to look forward to when they arrive at the office (2007). As we all know, communication is key and without it, there is no relationship. This leads to the type of culture that is being fostered within. To attract the right talent, organizations need to have a firm understanding on their current culture.

Understanding the factors that lead to high turnover rates is very valuable. It can get to the root cause of why people are leaving and help organizations improve their rates. While most organizations don’t track anything about the people they lose, being able to identify the

underlying trends can help them pinpoint who's likely to leave next before a resignation takes place (Armstrong, Bluit-Fisher, Lopez-Newman & Paul, 2009).

Leadership Strategies

Strong leadership is vital. Goals, feedback, supervisor communication, autonomy, and resources all have an effect on turnover (Phillips & Hernandez, 2018). Nonprofit leaders must satisfy employee needs and expectations to improve retention rates. According to Kristin G. Linscott, nonprofit leaders must focus on various factors such as leadership development, compensation and employee relationships to reduce turnover and ensure commitment (2011). Nonprofit leaders need to make turnover a part of their strategic plan to improve organizational performance. However, some nonprofit leaders lack retention strategies to meet needs.

Every strategy that a leader uses to retain their employees longer depends on the style of the individual. We all have a different way of leading and even the most valuable leaders tend to have a blind spot when it comes to evaluating their own leadership style (Alkhawaja, 2017). Oftentimes that blind spot is ignored and not taken into consideration when discussing turnover rates. Whether a leader uses feedback, (communication for empowerment) as their retention skills, it does not mean that all employees will commit to staying for a long time (Alkhawaja, 2017). Strategies that are currently in place to increase retention are trust, fairness and transparency.

Leadership styles are a big part of employee turnover, it is caused by a feeling of inclusion. In order for an employee to build trust, one should expect fairness and justice to be present. If trust is lost between the leader and the follower, then this influence is expected to fade away (Alkhawaja, 2017). If employees start to lose trust in their leaders they begin to disengage in their daily work performance. This lack of trust leads to accusations of a lack of integrity (Alkhawaja, 2017). This might directly result in employee turnover or in the long run, eventually decrease their loyalty toward the organization affecting their development and growth.

Another strategy will be fairness. Being fair means treating everyone with respect and equality. When employees have the opportunity to participate in making the vision of the

organization, they feel included towards achieving its mission. People commit to what they care about, and not what they are simply told to do (kim & Lee, 2017). The team must always be united to make their way to the finish line or else they will get lost and lose their teammates along the way. Meaning that an organization will not be able to achieve its goals without each individual member, such as upper management and staff do not share a vision. (Alkhawaja, 2017).

The last strategy from this research is transparency. Leader needs to lead with a clear transparent view. Leaders claim having a transparent policy platform, the trick is making sure they are following through so that employees are loyal to the leader and the organization overall. Trust and loyalty cannot be bought, therefore transparency is a top strategy when looking in to turnover rates (Alkhawaja, 2017).

That being said, the strategies that leaders are using for retention rates relate to the factors on turnover rates. If leaders do not act upon these fundamental differences between leadership and authority, leaders would most likely end up having employees that act with compliance only and massive employee turnover will result (Alkhawaja, 2017). It is crucial for leaders to cultivate the desired inspirational culture among employees to promote and propagate a positive culture (Bosomtwe, & Obeng, 2018).

Organizational culture

In order to have a successful organization, it has to be based on a strongly and widely shared set of beliefs that are supported by strategy and culture (SHRM, 2018). The literature review on organizational culture describes the importance of fostering a positive culture in order to have an environment that rewards and recognizes those who truly embody the values and mission. A strong culture starts with recruiting and selecting applicants who share the organization's beliefs and thrive in the culture within. Human Resources has a vital role on this, as they are the ones who develop orientation and trainings. All organizations are different. There is not a one-size fits all culture template that meets the needs of all organizations (SHRM, 2018).

Ineffective culture can bring down the organization and its leadership team. Disengaged employees, high turnover, poor services, and micromanagement are examples of how a wrong

culture can negatively impact its environment (SHRM, 2018). In order to improve the organization's overall performance, the culture must provide a strategic competitive advantage, and all values must be firmly upheld. A strong culture can bring in many benefits such as enhanced trust and cooperation. Employees whose organizations have strongly defined cultures can also justify their behavior at work because those behaviors fit the culture (SHRM, 2018).

Organizational culture can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including leadership behaviors, communication styles and internally distributed messages. The literature expresses many different definitions as to what organizational culture is (SHRM, 2018). Since culture is difficult to define, organizations may have trouble maintaining consistency in their messages about culture. Employees may also find it difficult to identify and communicate about perceived cultural inconsistencies (SHRM, 2018). An organization's customs, traditions, rituals, behavioral norms, symbols and general way of operating are the visible manifestation of its culture; they are what one sees when walking into the organization (SHRM, 2018).

Culture is a very powerful force that influences the behavior of people and dictate how they dress, act and perform their jobs. Every organization has its own personality as humans do and is passed on to incoming employees (Schepers, De Gieter, Pepermans, Du Bois, Caers & Jegers, 2005). The most important thing about culture is that it becomes the glue that bonds the organization together (Schepman & Zarate, 2008). If the relationship is negative the turnover becomes high. Although turnover is associated with the number of negative consequences such as a toxic environment and negative culture, it is also a reason on why employees leave the organization through disengagement, burn out and lack of support (Munn, 2018).

Research shows that assessing organizational culture and developing goals of improvement can prevent turnover and increase retention (Munn, 2018). With this being one of the top factors in high turnover perpetuating a strong culture is extremely needed. A strong culture is a common denominator among the most successful organizations (Schepman & Zarate, 2008). Leaders in successful organizations foster a culture that focuses on building positive relationships to communicate their cultural identities to employees and prospective hires. They are clear about their values and how those values define their organization. Human resources professionals have many tools for developing and sustaining a high performance organizational

culture that can potentially lower turnover rates (SHRM, 2018). The biggest challenge is deciding how to use these tools and how to allocate resources appropriately (SHRM, 2018).

Section 3 Methods and Approaches

The focus of this study was to explore the factors that positively and negatively impact the retention rates in social service organizations to achieve their mission. This research included why employees are departing from these organizations and what efforts can be made to retain talent to serve the needs of our community. A qualitative research was the chosen method to study the turnover and retention of employees within the nonprofit organization. The qualitative method was used by collecting and reviewing data from expert interviews, one focus group and literature review. The use of this method provides the ability to analyze descriptions by using direct explanations from people and their own experiences. Qualitative interviewing was an appropriate approach to collect the meanings and interpretations of the participants' points of view, gain insight, and address the problem that some leaders of nonprofit organizations lack strategies to retain their workforce. Therefore, it was important to gather data from leaders and employees on what is and is not working, and their opinions of the best methods.

Literature Review

A qualitative method is not complete or effective without an analytical and critical literature review (Munn, 2018). An analysis of the literature on employee retention and nonprofit incentive methods was performed. The literature review supported the efforts to define and examine the factors and problems in retention. All information was broken into three different sections following each research question. These sections include: factors on high turnover rates, leadership strategies that are currently being used in order to retain their employees and the importance of organizational culture. The main focus of the literature review was exploring if and how nonprofits are fostering an environment that breeds high performance, retention and engagement. Other areas of review were the on-boarding and hiring process done by human resources, as well as a look into the Nonprofit Employee Retention and Engagement report for

discussing reasons employees stay or leave an organization (2015). The literature revealed the important aspects that became a guide for the development of the interview questions. The interview questions were based on the information identified and mentioned in previous chapters in the literature review.

Expert Interviews

The planning of the interviews involved taking the following into consideration: who to interview, how to order the questions, what questions to ask, how to record what was being said, and when to stop interviewing. Interviewing required flexible skills that ensured a rapport was created and the questions were answered objectively and fully, making sure the interview stayed on topic. Five semi structured expert interviews were conducted to gain in-depth context and insights on employment practices and current conditions. Interviewees included three former employees who worked in the organization for more than four years. It also included the Executive Director and the Program Director. All interviews were conducted with one specific nonprofit social service organization from the state of Nevada. Upon the request of the nonprofit leadership team, all participants and the name of the agency will be kept confidential and anonymous.

The recruitment and solicitation of all participants involved emailing individuals known personally or referred by someone from the agency. The body of the email contained an explanation to the project and asked them to participate. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they can opt to stop the interview at any point or skip any of the questions if they did not wish to speak upon. A verbal consent was done at the beginning of each interview. Six inquiries were sent out and five were received. All five interviews were conducted in person. Notes were taken during the interview and all information was recorded so that the thoughts and ideas could be analyzed at a later time. All participants were asked and agreed to the recording of the interviews at the beginning of the interview.

The interview questions for the Executive Director and Program Director were formulated to gain an understanding of the factors and implementation of retention strategies and how they view the importance of such a topic. The interview consisted of eleven questions

broken into three categories: turnover rates, strategies currently being used, and employee needs. The questions for the three former employees were formulated to gain an understanding of personal experiences of working there and reasons for leaving the agency. The interview consisted of seven questions discussing their experience, development opportunities and organizational culture. The semi structured interviews provided an opportunity to understand how the leaders and former employees felt about the issue of employee retention. Knowing that it is important to get the participant to open up and to establish trust and rapport, all questions were ordered from easiest to hardest. Each question had a follow up question that would allow the participant to have a better understanding of what was being asked. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

The data collection device for the semi structured interviews was an iPhone equipped with the voice memo app. The iPhone was reliable, easy to use and was utilized for all interviews. Notes were also taken during the interview so that all thoughts and ideas could be looked at and combined at a later time. These notes encourage active listening and reframing of all questions that were being discussed. The interviews were recorded using the voice memo app that allowed all files to save in their own folder. The interview was transcribed to text in order to compare results from all five interviews.

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted with the frontline employees of a Nevada social service organization who requested anonymity. The focus group provided important qualitative data including what compelled them to accept their current position, organizational culture, their relationship with the management team and opportunities for development. The focus group aimed to find answers that were more open-ended and in depth than a simple yes or no answer. The focus group was valuable because follow-up questions could be asked and no upper management individual was present. This allowed participants to speak more open and honestly about their personal experiences of working there.

All participants were recruited by the Program Director of the agency. An email was sent out to all former staff three weeks before, letting them know about the project and the

opportunity for participation. It was scheduled and set up for no more than one hour. The focus group took place at the agency's facility in one of the conference rooms. All participants were given the incentive of one full paid hour as part of their participation. A written email response was used as a consent as part of their agreement. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they can opt to stop the interview at any point if wished to no longer participate. Fifteen inquiries were sent out and seven were received. The focus group included three tenured employees and four new staff. At the beginning of the focus group, all participants were asked if they gave consent to the recording of the interview. All participants agreed.

A focus group guide was created and used for the purpose of formulating and organizing the one hour session. A copy of the full guide is provided in Appendix B. This also helped with the format of each question and allowed each participant to open up during the session. The focus group consisted of seven questions broken into different categories such as current job satisfaction. An explanation of the project followed by some ground rules of the session was given at the beginning of the session. The session lasted for 60 minutes and all participants had the opportunity to speak up. Participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves as part of an ice breaker. They all enjoyed sharing a bit about themselves and what their current position/term was. This allowed them to feel more comfortable with each other as they continued to answer some of the questions. All data that was collected was done by an audio recording and written notes. At the end of the session they were reminded that all feedback provided that day will be kept confidential and only used for the purpose of this research project.

Section 4 Data Analysis

The primary method of data analysis for this project was the identification of patterns and themes using the interview data collected via written notes and recording. The answers to each of the five participants interviewed were compared with the focus group and conclusions were reached regarding what leaders deemed as important retention methods. The conclusions of the interviews were then matched to the literature research and implications and suggestions were

then prepared. The following will provide an overview of the topics/themes from each group of participants starting with the focus group, followed by former employees, and ending with the management team. Each topic will include responses from all individuals based on the questions that were asked. A list of all questions is available in Appendix B.

Table 1: Focus Group Participants

	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	CULTURE	SAFETY
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Trainings -Education opportunities -Mentorship -Leadership -Feedback <p>“We want to keep learning and growing in order to remain motivated.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A supportive environment -Fun -Appreciation -All managers make us feel welcomed. <p>“We work as a team and always help each other out. “</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better insurance options. -Safety trainings -Safety guidelines <p>“We need to be trained well in order to feel safe in the field.”</p>

All focus group participants are current employees of the nonprofit organization. Majority of them reported finding their job very meaningful and feeling happy with their current positions. When discussing the topic of staff development the majority of them reported the need to keep on growing and learning within the agency. “For me this is a starting position, but if we are able to grow within the organization I would definitely stay for a long time”(Employee #1). The staff continued to ask for more training, challenging projects and leadership opportunities. “Even if is a great position I would still like to keep learning and moving up as part of my self-growth”(Employee #2). It was mentioned that one of the benefits is school reimbursement. This seemed to be one of the top incentives as part of their motivation to work there. “I like that they

help you go back to school, a lot of organizations do not do that”(Employee #3). This is a great strategy for many nonprofits out there as part of their retention strategy.

The topic of culture was something the employees were passionate about when talking of it. “I love an organization that wants to help, If they see a problem they will try to solve with you” (Employee #2). “A positive work culture, means that I do not feel intimidated or afraid of my supervisors” (Employee #4). They described their own culture as a supportive environment where everyone works as a team and believe that is something others in the sector should be striving for. “Yeah everyone wants the opportunity to grow, but if you do not feel happy working there you will obviously leave” (Employee #5). Staff in a nonprofit organization are looking for the feeling of a family environment, somewhere where they are valued and appreciated for what they do.

Table 2: Former Employee Participants

	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	CULTURE	SAFETY
FORMER EMPLOYEES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Realistic Goals - A clear development plan. -Opportunity for growth & leadership. -New Trainings, less repetition. -Challenging projects. <p>“Extra work does not mean leadership opportunities.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Less fear, more communication. - A solution focused environment -Equality -Professionalism -Positivity <p>“Organizations need to practice what they preach.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lack of support in safety. -Need of appropriate training. -Support employees not numbers and deadlines. -Follow through with safety reports. <p>“ The safety of employees should always come first.”</p>

	<p>“They need a more clear and realistic plan that will be implemented in order for us to grow.”</p>	<p>“They need to create a solution focused culture where everyone feels equal to one another no matter the title.”</p>	<p>“Organizations need to create a safe work environment where employees are well trained to protect themselves in the field.”</p>
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The three former employees that were interviewed worked in the nonprofit organization for more than seven years. These are employees who have seen the ups and downs over the years. They discussed the importance of having a collaborative team, and decision making environment. Former employee #1 reported that in order to improve the culture, “organizations need to practice what they preach.” Accountability is another big topic when it comes to retention. If organizations do not follow through with what they promise their employees, the lack of trust begins leading them to quit their jobs. “Give employees the opportunity to speak up, create a solution focused environment that allows everyone to be included in the process” (former employee #2).

Staff development was the second discussion. Employees are asking for a more clear and realistic development plan that will help them grow. “Nonprofits invest in training, but not the right type to develop my skills” (former employee #3). “We do not want the same training every year, we need challenging new projects that will help us develop new skills” (former employee #2). Creating realistic goals is essential in helping employees grow and advance in their jobs. While there may not be an opportunity for advancement for every employee, staff can continue to progress in the traits and skills for their professional development journeys.

Table 3: Executive & Program Director

STRATEGIES IN PLACE	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	CULTURE	RETENTION
LEADERSHIP TEAM	-Incentives -Employee appreciation events -Shadowing opportunities -Community Trainings “Our goal is to let the employees decide what they want to learn.”	-Positive & Caring -Diversity in age & experience -Strong Communication -Welcoming & Supportive “We believe our culture continues to improve day by day, we want employees to feel welcome, supported & happy to be here.”	-50% retention rate -6000 \$ loss per employee - 2-3 months of services loss per family “Our goal is to implement ways that will allow to increase those rates to better serve our community.”

Both Executive Director and Program Director described some of the strategies that are currently in place for retention. Beginning with a budget of 75,000\$ that was given to the organization with the purpose of increasing their retention rates. The Employee Appreciation Committee put together a retention plan for the year that includes outside training, personal development, employee events and extra benefits. When discussing the topic of culture, the Executive Director stated that team building was one of the most important aspects in creating a positive environment. Building strong relationships with each other will improve the atmosphere in a more positive direction.

“For me, is important that retention strategies do not come from a top down mentality but instead from a bottom up, whatever is important for the staff is what should matter the most ” (Executive Director). Employees want to be heard and understood, they want to feel equal and valued as much as the upper management team is. No matter the title behind your name all leadership skills are valuable. “The individual choice they have to make their own decisions is the biggest key motivator, there is no need for micromanagement, we are all adults here and equality and inclusion comes first” (Executive Director). It is important for nonprofit organizations to be aware of the issues that are affecting the overall culture. One person can bring the whole team down if they do not feel appreciated, respected and valued. “If they are invested in it, they are more likely to appreciate it” (Program Director).

The data analysis identified three major themes: staff development, a fun and positive culture, and creating a safe work environment. These are strategies that employees want to see in an organization as part of their retention practices.

Theme 1: Staff Development

Each of the participants that participated in the interviews and focus group discussed employee development and ongoing training as an important retention strategy. “Employee development is recognized by many as a strategic tool for an organization’s continued growth, productivity and ability to retain key employees”(Munn, 2018). Employees viewed the lack of a clear development plan and opportunity for growth as an issue for the sector as a whole. The management team acknowledged the importance and need of leadership opportunities giving the employees the lead on what they want to keep learning. Allowing employees to develop new skills is essential, not only for overcoming retention but also for the mission success.

The two leaders who were interviewed stated their goal of offering the best training opportunities for employees to develop new skills. They both reported that offering a continuous access to the trainings allows organizations to promote from within and increase retention rates. No opportunity for advancement means that employees will go look for the opportunity somewhere else. Hence giving employees the opportunity to move up by allowing them to learn new skills within. Employees are asking for challenging projects and realistic goals in their staff

development plan. “We don't want extra work to become a leadership opportunity, we want this to be an opportunity for growth” (Interview Former Employee #1.)

Theme 2: A Fun and Positive Culture

All seven of the focus group participants and the two former employees spoke about creating a fun and positive work culture and experience for all staff. For example, Interview Former Employee #1 stated: “Organizations need to practice what they preach.” If they want staff to have a positive experience working there, they need to follow through and create a solution focused culture where everyone feels equal to one another, no matter the title. “We need transparency and commitment, allowing us to speak up without being afraid to do so” (Interview Former Employee #2). Besides positivity they all want more communication with the leaders of the organization followed by a welcoming and supportive environment. Fostering a positive, supportive, and encouraging working environment in which employee morale is high is important to employee retention and motivation. Organizations will benefit from cultivating a positive, supportive collaborative working environment where staff are happy to be there.

The management is aiming for a positive and caring environment where all staff feel welcomed and supported. “We believe our culture continues to improve day by day. We want employees to feel welcome, supported and happy to be here” (Executive Director). When working in a positive environment you will continue to be motivated, no matter the workload. “If leaders and employees around you are happy and ready to work, the chances of them staying longer are way higher” (Program Director). Sometimes it is not about the pay. A good morale may cause someone to stay. Sometimes is about what’s around you, an atmosphere of greater participation.

Theme 3: Creating a Safe Work Environment

Both former employees and current employees brought up the importance of a safe working environment. Social service organizations are recognizing that their staff often put themselves in harm's way while on the job and must be trained to protect themselves and learn how to create safer work environments (reardon, 2016). This was a topic that was not addressed

in any of the interview questions but was brought up multiple times by employees as part of anything else they wanted to add. “We are trained as social workers to look for our clients’ strengths, to advocate for them and to offer hope, but we are not trained to assess the client’s potential to harm us and to advocate for our own safety needs” (Interview Former Employee #1).

Current and past employees are asking for appropriate safety training and the support from their supervisors when feeling unsafe in the field. “Organizations need to create a safe work environment where employees are well trained to protect themselves in the field” (Interview Former Employee #2). They want to feel valued by making sure their safety is coming first rather than meeting deadlines and making numbers. “We need to be trained well in order to feel safe in the field” (Focus group participant). These interviews, research and my own experience in the field, indicate that staff in social service organizations receive little training on workplace safety and crisis management, compared to other professions.

Section 5 Implications and Recommendations

All nonprofit organizations are organized and led differently than for-profit organizations. They all have different mission, values and goals. Therefore, all research was done from the nonprofit viewpoint by interviewing current and past employees in the nonprofit sector. The information found in both the literature and the interviews indicated that nonprofits have a difficult time retaining employees. Is an issue that is not being addressed as part of their strategic planning but is big enough that it needs to be. Nonprofit organizations depend on workers. If it wasn’t for them, no services would be provided to the community. These are individuals that drive the mission and values forward by providing the best quality of services. The following implications regarding key employee retention strategies are based on the literature and compared to the responses of the focus group and the five individuals who were interviewed.

Getting the Right People on the Bus

In the book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins states that “ If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great.” Hiring the right people since the beginning is key to a successful organization and more specifically to retention. The literature talks about the importance of hiring right as part of retention. It is important for nonprofit organizations to hire people who realize that they are working to help the mission and not for a high pay. Those individuals who enjoy what they do and work well with others can fit well with the job. They are more likely to remain engaged with high job satisfaction, which in the long run has the potential to lead to longer retention.

The process begins with human resources, making sure those individuals have a background with similar services. Many nonprofits use online sources to find key employees, but there is also other means to search for applicants. A suggestion would be to ask employees for recommendations on who they know would be interested in applying. From my own experience this idea seems to work well as those individuals already know the organization from what that person has told them. Another suggestion would be to find universities and colleges that have students who would fit the organizational mission of the nonprofit. These universities can become sources of highly talented individuals who could fill open positions. Going to colleges or universities to promote the openings would help create relationships with large sources of potential employees. Yes, compensations and incentives are also important, but “The purpose of a compensation system should not be to get the right behaviors from the wrong people, but to get the right people on the bus in the first place, and to keep them there”(Collins, 2001).

Staff Development Plan

Once the right employees are chosen as part of their mission and values, it should then be the goal of developing their talents. According to the participants from current and past

employees, development opportunities are a crucial practice to retaining employees. All staff members noted that they want to keep learning and growing in order to remain motivated. Creating a development plan for each employee will allow all supervisors and directors to know exactly what employees are looking for in order to provide the help necessary. Many nonprofits offer the opportunity of training and mentorship but most of these are informal measures and are not measured or evaluated for effectiveness. Employees are asking for a more clear and realistic plan that will be implemented in order for them to continue growing and learning. Employee development is not the leaders benefit, but to the benefit of the employee and the organization (Phillips & Hernandez, 2018). The literature stated that employees will often remain devoted to an employer when they feel that training and development is a priority (Munn, 2018).

Organizations with high retention rates feature continuous employee opportunities (Munn, 2018). Therefore, leaders seeking to increase retention rates should incorporate meaningful and challenging development programs such as training in all staff functions. All participants mentioned the importance of employee development for professional growth and the lack of opportunities was noted as an issue for the nonprofit sector as a whole. Employees will not be satisfied for long if there is no encouragement and growth that will continue to keep them motivated in their day to day functions. This means providing employees with sufficient development will allow them to incorporate goals that will improve their skills. This would benefit both the employee and the nonprofit. A staff development plan would assist with guiding and pointing key employees in the right direction towards advancement. Providing this opportunity for employees will show staff that the agency cares about how important they are to the mission and that they are listening to their ideas at all times. It simply shows those future employees and current staff that their opinion matters and that they will do the best they can to continue to value their performance. Last but not least, train your leadership team on what questions to ask during an interview that can help bring out the person's true motivation. This would help build and implement assessments that will help identify the right person for the job.

Building a Positive Environment

A nonprofit organization is made up of different positions that make the organization run daily. No matter your title or role, there are plenty of opportunities while working at a nonprofit organization for you to serve as a leader. Whether you are directing a board, leading a committee, managing a team, or coordinating a project, the goal is always the same: to lead effectively. Every single person is a leader in their own way and they all deserve to be treated with respect. To retain employees and increase job satisfaction, building a positive culture is one of the most important strategies of them all. Nonprofit employees are not just looking for a paycheck they're looking for a job they will enjoy going to. The larger your organization gets, the more difficult it can get to maintain a positive and unified culture. A positive culture can be reinforced by nurturing an attitude of mission-based work and respect. Define and communicate the organization's values and ensure they are part of the employee's personal values.

To build a positive environment, it is also important for the leadership team to have an open door policy that will help staff feel comfortable enough to approach any of them, but also help eliminate barriers between positions. Building a positive relationship is also part of the organization's culture. The Executive Director of the Nevada nonprofit interview reported that making decisions not from a top down mentality but instead from a bottom up is what should be done. Giving employees the opportunity to take charge on those changes will continue to help the atmosphere as they continue to provide the best service for the community. An "open door" policy does not mean employees will walk through it (UST, 2015). Nonprofit managers need to take on the responsibility of one on one meetings and check ins with employees. This will give staff the opportunity to discuss their concerns and request feedback on their performance. These regular check-ins can help an employee feel heard and empowered in impacting their workplace culture. "Good managers aren't born, they're created. Providing leadership education and management-skill training is vital to helping build the leadership an organization needs to engage and retain employees" (UST, 2015).

Management Transparency

The majority of all participants from the interviews reported the need of management transparency in nonprofit organizations. As part of this need they want to see leaders and managers adapting transparency in everything they do. Transparency means telling the truth about your organization, your partnership, and your goals. It means disclosing who is benefitting from a campaign, how much they are receiving, and precisely how and when funds are being raised and disbursed, but it also means letting your employers know all of it (The Nonprofit Times, 2014). Most of the time this topic is discussed more in fundraising when it comes to being transparent for donors, but it is also something that involves the staff. Just like any other donor employees want transparency from the management team, they want to know exactly what the organization is working on. The employees want to engage in causes they care about. They do not want to be involved in an organization that has something to hide. That is why the transparency of your nonprofit organization is crucial as part of retention strategies.

A former employee stated "It takes a lot to trust a person, now imagine having to trust your job after they did not tell you they had planned to eliminate positions due to budget cuts." Studies show that management transparency is the most significant predictor of employee happiness, and that leaders who practice transparency and positivity are seen as more trustworthy and effective (Herman & McCambridge, 2009). This is what the staff wants, they want a trustworthy organization who will be accountable and understanding of letting others know where they stand. "Every organization should be thinking about how they can be more transparent,"(Employee #1). "It is one of the lowest to no cost strategies to tackle right away. It of course requires an ongoing commitment from management to be more transparent to the very people they so carefully brought on board to be part of the team. "At the end of the day, to give is to get." (Executive Director).

Employee Safety

Nonprofit employers have a large role to play in providing a safe and healthy workplace. This was not something discussed and found in the literature review but was a topic that was brought up multiple times by interviewees. Employees described this as another factor for turnover. They claim the importance of supporting employees not just numbers and deadlines. “Organizations need to create a safe work environment where employees are well trained to protect themselves in the field”(Former Employee). Employees felt the lack of support when it came to the topic of safety and reported wanting more training in order to continue performing their job.

Focus group and interviews that were conducted show that workplace safety is a valid concern for employees in the social services field. Each staff that provides direct services goes out into the field with no more than a pen and a pencil. These employees spend at least three to four hours in a home whom they have not known for more than a week. The goal is to provide the best services and in order to do so we need to make sure the employees are protected at all times. If a staff does not feel safe in the field and it is being reported to upper management, the strategy should be in place to support this individual in any situation.

As part of a suggestion, it is recommended for an organization to encourage staff to “team up” for home visits with potential violent clients. To adapt panic buttons on their cell phones that will allow them to ask for help in case of an emergency. Always make the schedule known for other staff and supervisors. The agency needs to make sure to always train new employees on safety policy, and review policy with all employees on a regular basis. Most importantly, provide the support to those staff, who have the right to refuse to make any home visits with clients when the risk factors are too high. In this study its recommend that employee’s safety be taken into consideration to promote employee retention and positive behaviors. A supportive and safe atmosphere will enhance the positive impact on working strength and commitment to an organization.

Figure 1.2 Strategies For Employee Retention

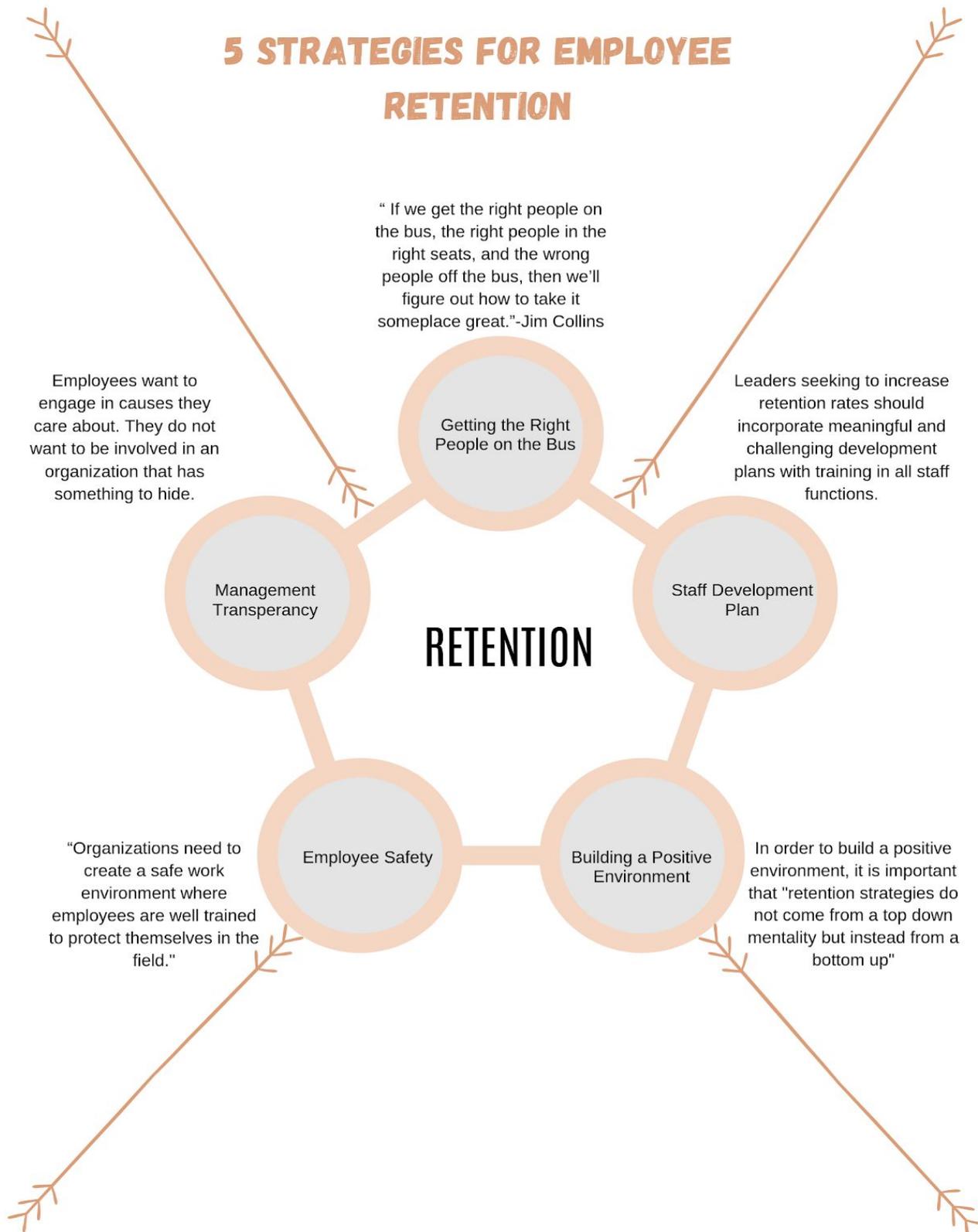


Figure 1.2 shows all five strategies for employee retention including quotes and descriptions to each one. Each strategy will be able to help any nonprofit organization with ideas and implementations for creating an effective retention plan. All implications and recommendations for each strategy were created based on the literature review including all results and responses from the focus group and the five individuals who were interviewed.

Section 6 Conclusion

Here's the truth: nonprofits with low retention rates are more common than we might think. These nonprofit organizations have been struggling with the issue for a while, but it often seems to get left behind as other issues arise. Retaining employees in the social services workplace is critical for maintaining organizational knowledge and optimizing organizational performance. Many people in the community rely on nonprofit organizations and the majority of these organizations will not function without the amazing staff who give it their all to serve and help those in need. While the focus of these implications is on creating retention strategies, it also needs to be recognized that turnover in a nonprofit is inevitable. Putting in place some of these strategies as a part of a retention plan will lead to having a great team of talent. By finding the right employees that fit the organization and then treating those individuals well through a balance of support and encouragement, organizations will continue to find more individuals who will make the nonprofit a long-term career. Feeling fully supported in all aspects of their job by the nonprofit leaders may help find the work they do to be a higher calling or personal mission.

These suggestions that were given based on the literature and the interviews can assist nonprofits to improve employee retention, reduce the high effects of turnover, and improve employee's work environments. These suggestions do not cost the organization more than what they are already doing. Only a little extra time and effort. In the long run, all strategies and investments made for turnover and retention will be worth the final results for better community outcomes. Nonprofit social services employees go into the field wanting to make a positive difference for others in need. It is the responsibility of the organization and its leaders to invest in

their team, stream them with kindness and give them the opportunity for growth they deserve. If nonprofits want to attract talent they need to put into place a plan that will lead to organizational success. For the final inspiration, below is a quote by Bosomtwe and Obeng:

“For any organization to promote growth and create a culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging in a group effort that does not happen in one day and one night. This strong foundation starts when we, leaders and followers, start viewing others as humans with needs and feelings, not as steps in a ladder for us to climb” (2018).

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Appendix A

Upper Management Interview Questions :

1. How many frontline staff members have left your agency in the past five years? **RQ3**
 - Do you know some of the reasons on why they left?
2. How has the turnover rates impacted your agency's services? **RQ3**
 - Did it affect the number of families being served?
3. What strategies are currently in place to retain employees longer? **RQ1**
 - Which methods have been the most effective?
 - Employee Satisfaction?
 - Employee Engagement?
4. When an employee leaves, do you typically perform exit interviews? **RQ1**
 - Do those get evaluated/ reviewed?
 - What do departing employees tell you are the primary factors in their decision to leave?
5. How do you assess employee needs in your retention strategies? **RQ1**
6. What do you find to be key motivators for people to join your organization? **RQ2**
7. What are the biggest challenges within the organization to recruitment and retention?

RQ3

- What has been implemented to improve the situation?
8. Does your organization utilize any means to motivate employees to be high performers?
RQ2 - If so, what methods have been the most effective?
 9. Does your organization assist employees in career planning and development of a career path? **RQ2**
 - Any other development opportunities? Trainings, new positions?
 - How have your employees responded to these strategies?

10. In terms of organizational culture does the mission, vision and values reflect the current culture? (how does the culture look like). **RQ2**

-Do employees get recognized for their work?

-Do employees have positive communication between staff and management?

11. Anything else you would you like to share about the strategies you use to retain your staff?

Former Employees of the organization Interview Questions:

1. Did you complete an exit interview before leaving the organization? **RQ1**

-If so, what were some of the questions on there?

2. What was the reason on why you left? **RQ3**

3. During your time working there, were you given any opportunities for growth/development? **RQ2**

4. Describe your organization's culture while working there? **RQ2**

- Did you have a positive work experience?

- Did you feel happy and supported when working there?

5. What is one thing you wished your organization would have done differently in order to keep you longer? **RQ1**

6. Tell me about your experience about your new job?

-Where do you work now?

-What does your current employer do differently than the previous organization?

7. Anything you would like to add?

Appendix B

Focus Group Guide - June 2019

Notes to the Facilitator

- It is recommended to conduct at least one focus groups minimum with this script, with 6-7 people the group.
- If possible, snacks and refreshments are a great idea to bring to the focus groups. Participants may also appreciate a 5 minute break halfway through the session.
- A one hour on the clock paid incentive will be given.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this focus group is to research the factors that impact positively and negatively retention rates in social service organizations by hearing from their current frontline staff regarding their perceptions and personal experiences.

Research Questions:

RQ1. Why do social services organizations have such high turnover rates?

RQ2. What Strategies are nonprofit leaders using in order to retain their employees longer?

RQ3: Are nonprofits fostering an environment that breeds high performance, retention and engagement?

Agenda & Script: (60 minutes total)

Intro [11:00am - 11:10am]

Welcome and thank you for helping with the research of the factors in retention rates and be able to help nonprofits foster an environment that breeds high engagement . I know your time is valuable and I appreciate the feedback that you all are providing today that will help leaders target the issue of high turnover rates . After this focus group has ended, all information will be put together and analyzed all responses using what you all share with me today. This session will be audio-recorded in order to be able to best ensure thorough and accurate interpretation of your comments and feedback. All of your responses will be kept anonymous and names won't be attached to specific comments made once I compile all notes from the recorded sessions.

Ground Rules:

I have a few ground rules and expectations for this focus group that I want to go over before we start:

1. Be respectful of others' opinions and experiences. You have the right to disagree, but please be respectful.
2. Stay on topic.
 - a. I [the facilitator] have some guiding questions for our conversation today. If you think of something you'd like to share that doesn't relate to the question I ask, hold onto that thought and wait until I ask a question that matches what you want to share. If an opportunity doesn't come up to share that thought, feel free to come to me after this session ends and I would love to hear what you have to say!
3. Allow everyone an opportunity to speak.
 - a. This is a shared space and we want to hear equally from everyone here.
4. Don't interrupt or cut anyone off.
5. No side conversations
 - a. We want to give our full attention and be respectful of the person who is speaking and sharing their thoughts.
6. Don't hold back. No response is a bad response. I want to hear from you.

7. Offer feedback that's specific to your own experiences.
 - a. Your individual stories and experiences are important to us. Everyone has a unique perspective on each question.
8. Feel free to ask clarifying questions about questions offered by me [the facilitator] anytime.
9. Finally, no cell phones or other electronic devices will be allowed during this session. Let's all take a minute now to ensure that our phones are silenced or turned off before we begin. Please let me [the facilitator] know now if you will need to take a call or text from a parent or guardian during our conversation today.

Does anyone have any that they'd like to add?

Are there any questions or comments before we begin?

Warm-up/Ice breaker [11:10-11:15am]

Before we begin, let's go around the room and briefly introduce ourselves so we know who is in the room.

- Name
- How long have you been working with the agency?
- What is your current position?

Focus Group Questions [11:15-11:45am]

1. What compelled you to accept your current position (salary, benefits, mission of the organization)? **RQ3**
2. Do you think nonprofits in this area pay employees a living wage? **RQ1**
 - Doe salary affect your decision whether to keep a position longer ?
3. Does your organization provide opportunities for development? **RQ1**
 - If so, what are they?

(mentorship, training, leadership, etc.)

4. How does your organization's culture look like? **RQ2**

- Is it a positive work experience?

-Do you feel happy and supported working here?

5. What makes you excited to work here? **RQ1**

-What is one thing that could nourish this relationship? (Between you & the organization)

6. Do you find it easy and welcoming to speak to anyone of the management team? **RQ2**

- Do you feel comfortable addressing any concerns?

7. Anything else you would like to add based on your experience working here?

Thank you & Conclusion [11:50-12:00pm]

That concludes our session for today! Thank you so much for participating. As a reminder, the feedback provided today will be kept confidential and only used for the purpose of this research project. Are there any final questions or comments anybody would like to share at this time? If you have anything else you would like to share with me [the facilitator], I will be in this room for the next [#] minutes and would love to hear any other feedback or stories you might have.

Author's Bio

Marisela Aguina is a Master of Nonprofit Administration candidate in the School of Management at the University of San Francisco. She plans to use her knowledge and experience to continue her work in the nonprofit sector. Her background includes an undergraduate degree in Social Work from the University of Nevada Las Vegas and an associate degree in Psychology from the College of Southern Nevada. With more than 5 years of experience working in social services, Marisela was able to serve more than 80 families and 350 children. Marisela began her career in the nonprofit sector by working at a nonprofit in Las Vegas as an In-home consultant. At this agency Marisela worked with the at-risk youth population having home visits with parents and community team meetings with school personnel, probation officers and agencies. Marisela completed in home assessments with family members in order to develop a service plan that would help support the family and their children's success. At this agency Marisela was able to take on different leadership opportunities including the mentorship of new employees and her participation in two different committees within the organization. As a first-generation graduate student, Marisela's mission is to live life to the fullest with love and respect, fighting for positive change. By advocating and giving a voice to those who live in the shadows of this country.