

A WORKFORCE IN CRISIS CASE B: AN ORGANIZATIONAL DILEMMA

Marko Horn
University of North Georgia

Jonathan Krispin
Valdosta State University

Logan Crace
University of Alberta

A healthcare administration organization in the adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) field is struggling with staffing, turnover, and burnout/stress symptoms within their workforce. Labor is the most important resource for the organization yet mounting pressures in a competitive labor market make it very difficult for the organization to hire, train, and retain talent. The organization's chief executive is trying to determine how she can improve the situation and what initiatives she can put in place so that the organization is viewed as an employer of choice for personal care staff.

INTRODUCTION:

In the Fall of 2019 Diane was sitting at her fireplace in a quiet moment at home, contemplating the biggest problem she was facing as the CEO of United Cerebral Palsy (UCP), a not-for-profit organization active in the adults with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities Industry. She led the organization for 25 years through a period of tremendous growth. She has a total of 35 years industry experience and has been recognized nationally, but the workforce problems in the industry are a tough nut to crack. Human resources, in particular the Direct Caregiver Staff and her Front Line Supervisors, were absolutely essential to the mission of the organization, yet that part of her staff was plagued by stress, burn-out, and a turnover rate of almost 50 percent. Horror stories of abuse in the industry surface over and over. Just this year a client with very limited cognitive responses, a client of an organization in Arizona, gave birth after being raped by staff. At a Florida facility, 4 staff were indicted after physically abusing a woman in their care, captured in a gruesome video. Even though these incidents occur with a certain amount of frequency in the industry, Diane was certain abuse is not the norm.

Nevertheless, one case is already a case too many because the constituency her organization serves are the most vulnerable people in our society. UCP must hire and maintain staff that can be trusted to do the right thing even when no supervisor is present.

Her organizations mission is to “to positively support and impact the achievement of a *Life Without Limits* for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities”. This essentially means her organization is committed to supporting all of her clients to live their best life possible, which can only be provided by caring and supportive staff that has substantial relationships with the people in their care. Many of her clients have tremendous potential and capabilities that need to be uncovered. She knows of good examples how clients can live a fulfilled life and even support themselves with employment, like an autistic client in Memphis, TN. He folds pizza boxes several times faster as the average person can. He goes to work at a pizza delivery service for part time employment and everybody loves him there. His life is enriched by being part of the community. The improvement of her workforce has been a strategic goal of UCP since several years now, and a couple of initiatives have been enacted with differing results. Lately a team of University Researchers have offered to support her efforts, but Diane is questioning if she should give these Professors access to her organization. She made a particular bad experience with an outside consultant, which left her wondering if mainstream concepts and managerial ideas are even applicable to her unique situation.

UCP OF GEORGIA

UCP is a comprehensive service organization offering a wide range of supports for people living with many intellectual and developmental disabilities, including cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, down syndrome, spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, physical and intellectual disabilities. UCP offers services to over 600 individuals and families daily, offering customized supports designed to enable individuals to maximize their potential, and discover talents and skills to achieve personal goals. The organization is a very cost-efficient provider spending 89 cents of every dollar they receive directly on community services. Operating 56 single family community homes throughout the State as well as several day programs. The day programs offer daily support services to UCP’s own residential clients as well as the clients of external residential service providers. The average day of one of UCP’s clients is spent getting ready in the morning at the residential facility, roughly from 9 am to 3 pm at the day program, with the remainder of the day spent back with their caretakers at the residential facility.

STATE OF THE WORKFORCE

In their 2017 “Report to the President about America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis”, the Presidents Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID)

outlined the effects this workforce crisis has on people with intellectual disabilities, families, communities, and the US economy. In 2015 of the 553.8 billion dollar Medicaid expense, over 20% was spent on long term care services. The following statistics were broken out in the report:

- Average Direct Support Professionals (DSP) wages of \$10.72 per hour.
- Average DSP wages below the federal poverty level for a family of four.
- Half of DSPs relying on government-funded and means-tested benefits.
- Most DSPs working two or three jobs.
- Average annual DSP turnover rates of 45 percent (range 18-76 percent).
- Average vacancy rates of 9 percent.

It has been difficult for UCP to adequately staff the houses with primary caretakers. This, in turn increased burnout, role overload, role ambiguity and stress for the staff. To make matter worse, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics predictions, the two fastest growing occupations in the decade between 2016 and 2026 in the United States will be in the Public Service Industry, namely Personal Care Aides (38.6% projected growth) and Home Health Aides (47.3% projected growth) because of the aging and affluent baby boomer generation. The public Service Industry will therefore rely heavily on an ability to educate and recruit workers for those professions to fill the growing demand. This will lead to an even more competitive labor market in the industry. Even though taking care of the elderly is also a demanding job, Diane is afraid that most Direct Care Professionals (DSP) might still prefer to work with the elderly than with adults with IDD.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Five years ago, the Top Management Team of UCP identified workforce development as the most pressing issue to fulfil the organization's mission. Recruitment, retention and turnover issues were not only a significant expense for the organization because of recruitment and training costs, but there were also critical incidents that could have been avoided if the staff had more experience. Critical incidents and unexpected deaths of clients in the industry were increasing at an alarming rate after the closure of the State Mental Health facilities and the final transition to residential services. The Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) report of the year previous to her strategic initiative stated: "According to the State's Annual Quality Management Report, in 2014 there were 141 unexpected deaths. The report also indicates high rates of hospitalizations (1,327), incidents requiring law enforcement intervention (376), significant injuries (326), elopements (293), and alleged physical abuse (258) of individuals with disabilities in community settings. In each category incidents increased as compared to 2013, ranging from an increase of 5.8%

(elopements) to 22.9% (allegations of physical abuse). Although the State's report combines data relating to individuals with mental health and those with developmental disabilities, critical incidents impacting individuals with developmental disabilities in community settings account for 70% of all incidents in 2014." With many of those critical incidents being avoidable with better trained and experienced staff, it became clear to Diane that this issue needed to be presented to her Board of Advisors. The Board of Advisors approved the initiative, and it became part of UCP's Strategic Plan.

Diane and her team went to work right away and focused on the low hanging fruit to better the organizational culture. Over the years a few policies had found its way into use at the organization that were at some point well intended, yet detrimental to staff satisfaction. For example, if staff damaged or broke UCP's property such as kitchen appliances or vehicles, the employee was required to pay the insurance deductible. This was a financial burden placed on staff that turned out to demotivate the staff. In a comprehensive overhaul of UCP's policies and procedures these policies were changed. In addition, the organization applied substantial resources to show staff appreciation in forms of bonuses and small gifts. The disciplinary procedures were also revisited, and the organization introduced "coaching" rather than disciplinary action for the first missteps, mistakes, or policy violations of staff. All the internal changes had the desired effect and UCP became a better organization to work for, but there was only so much that could be done from the inside without external guidance.

CONSULTANTS

UCP turned to outside consultants to secure some expertise in workforce development from specialists in the field. Diane secured the services of a nationally known expert and published author in employee engagement and retention, whose programs promised an up to 20% turnover reduction through the application of stay interviews. Conceptually this made a lot of sense to the TMT, so the organization spent significant resources to execute the program at UCP. The idea of the stay interviews was that Front-Line Supervisors would conduct these interviews with staff in regular intervals. It was designed to build trust and identify why staff might have the propensity to leave, so that some of those issues could be addressed. Unfortunately, this approach introduced a lot of turmoil and discontent because the managers were not able to process the candid feedback from the staff. Some of the managers got defensive and it led to dysfunctional conflict in the houses. It became clear that the consultant never took the time to learn about the organization. He had a program that worked at other organizations in other industries, but he did not understand the workforce at UCP. He had a bandage, but never inspected the wound. Learning from the failed intervention, Diane realized she would have to focus on improving the Front-Line Supervisors as well.

RESEARCH TEAM

About a year ago Diane was connected to researchers of a Regional State University that offered to volunteer time to help UCP and its organizational goals. Grateful of the opportunity to bring some external expertise into the organization without cost to UCP, Diane happily invited the team. After learning the needs of the organization, the research team agreed to survey the front-line supervisors and direct care staff and to conduct a Front Line Supervisor training. The University Professors developed a survey that included several organizational behavior dimensions like job satisfaction, role overload and role conflict, several indicators of stress and turnover (emotional exhaustion, and intent to leave the organization), and a number of supervisor competencies.

The survey results shared by the University Professors showed, as anticipated, that her workforce suffered from low levels of job satisfaction, high degrees of physical fatigue and job tension, and reported a much higher intent to leave than was desirable. While some of the organization's regions within the state had relatively positive results, Diane noted that their largest region had the lowest average survey responses on almost half of the scales included in the survey – a real warning sign for her. Further, the survey results showed that supervisors systematically scored themselves more highly on the supervisor competency scales than did their subordinates, and the supervisor scores on physical fatigue, role overload and role conflict were particularly low. Additionally, these poor scores were significantly correlated with intent to leave the organization, another warning sign that stood out to Diane as she poured over the results.

After conducting a very well received 4-hour training for the First Line Supervisors in all 4 of UCP's regions in Georgia, Diane and her TMT de-briefed with the researchers. The University Professors, intrigued by what they learned, and being confident that they could help, proposed a continued involvement with UCP. Specifically, the researchers proposed an involved First Line Supervisor Training Pilot Program in one region. The focus would be on the application of positive reinforcement to improve the organization, so that turnover and stress of supervisors and direct care professionals would be reduced. The idea was that this application would make UCP a better place to work and become an employer of choice in the industry.

Diane had already reacted to the problems that partially lead to the failure of the external consultants by changing UCP's Organizational Structure. The First Line Supervisors used to be recruited out of the Direct Caregiver pool and every house had one supervisor. Much like in many other organizations the most capable Front-Line Workers, reliable, experienced and with longevity in the organization, which

seem to have managerial talent, got promoted. This left UCP with a set of supervisors that, much like their direct caregiver pool, had High-School or GED degrees as their highest education level. This appeared to be one of the major problems with the stay interviews. The supervisors simply did not have enough formal education, people skills, and maturity to accept legitimate worker critique as organizational feedback. They took it as personal offense. Diane wanted a higher education level for her supervisors (Bachelor's Degree required) but knew she would not be able to find qualified candidates for the pay her supervisors received at this time. To solve this problem the Organizational Structure was changed such that the new supervisors would now manage two or three houses instead of one, freeing resources to offer higher paychecks.

Accepting the University Professor's proposal would require Diane to open her organization to the researchers and share internal data, as well as commit resources. The researchers were not asking for financial compensation, but the training program would require a substantial amount of time to be spent by her Front Line Supervisors and there were some cost associated with the training itself (renting facilities etc.). The costs were not what Diane worried about though, the amount was small in comparison what she would have to pay for-profit consultants, and she was more than willing to spend resources on this particularly important strategic initiative. Diane's big worry was that if she opened her organization to these new external researchers, she could possibly introduce new problems. The last consultant made the relationship between her FLS and the DCPs so much worse. Diane worried if the traditional management teachings would really apply to her unique organization. Should she open her organization, including her organizational performance data, to these researchers? Diane was thinking about several ways how she could utilize the researchers as a resource for her organization. Those were:

- 1.) Have these researchers train her and her staff so they could create their own internal initiative. Positive reinforcement was proposed as a strategy to help UCPs problems. Diane did not know how to implement it, but maybe she could learn from them. How exactly does it work? How hard could it be? What exactly will she need to take in consideration?
- 2.) If she accepted the researcher's proposal to help and let them run the project, to what extent should she be involved? Should she have those researchers get her approval for every little step of the process, or should she just let them do what they proposed and simply move hurdles out of their way?
- 3.) These University Professors came highly recommended from a friend and industry insider, but should she do anything else to evaluate how much she can trust them doing the right thing? Was this the best use of her resources and the best use of the University Professor's time?

The biggest question remained. Should she open her organization to those external researchers? Diane is 100% committed to improving UCP, its culture, and the turnover problems, but now must determine if the potential rewards are worth the risk. All those deep thoughts were going through her head as the fire crackled in the background.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2018-02/2017%20PCPID%20Full%20Report_0.PDF
- <https://www.vor.net/images/stories/2017-2018/AbuseAndNeglect-4-15-18.pdf>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/23/health/arizona-woman-birth-vegetative-state/index.html>
- <https://people.com/crime/woman-vegetative-state-gave-birth-likely-been-pregnant-multiple-times-docs/>
- <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/shocking-video-shows-alleged-attack-mentally-disabled-woman-group-home-n1046986>
- <https://disabilityjustice.org/justice-denied/abuse-and-exploitation/>
- <https://ucpga.org/about-us/mission-vision/>
- <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/occupations-most-job-growth.htm>
- <https://www.vor.net/images/stories/2017-2018/AbuseAndNeglect-4-15-18.pdf>