



In addition to understanding your motivation to be a leader, what your mission is, and what the main purpose of your role is, your success as leader is going to largely be determined by your ability to understand your staff's why. Or their whys.

Because of course this includes their professional goals and motivations, but it doesn't stop there.

When I first became a director I was so determined with all good intentions of helping this program become a high-quality program, but I did it in the wrong way.

I came in like a bull in a china shop trying to change everything quickly without the input of the staff that were already there and without getting to know who they were as people.

In one particularly tense conversation with one of my staff, they said to me- shouted really- 'you don't even know who I am as a person!' At the time, I thought, 'so what?! We have a lot of work to do.'

In hindsight, I understand the mistake. Believe me it's hard for me to admit it, but I think it's important as we look back on our journey and our path as leaders where we can see the mistakes we've made over time, and we can see how far we've come and how much we've grown.

Sharing those mistakes with other leaders can help them not feel so alone and maybe not make just as many mistakes as you did or certainly not as many as I did along the way.

Now, of course, each of your staff is an individual. Some of them will want to keep their personal lives incredibly separate from their professional ones. As their leader you need to respect that. Other staff are going to want to divulge too much of their personal lives. As a leader, you need to set up some boundaries.

Most of your staff are going to want to know that you care about them as human beings. That you don't just see them as replaceable as numbers as employees, but you want to know who they are and you care about them as people. As you build relationships with your team, how are you making that happen?

When it comes to their professional goals and their motivations, do you know what they care about?

Of course as team leader, you know what goals they're required to reach by the nature of the position at your organization.

But what other goals do they have for themselves? Have you had that conversation?

This is one of the most powerful important conversations you can have with your team and you can continue to have with your team as circumstances and interests change over



time.

'What are you trying to do and how can I support you?'

There are some staff who are going to stay in one field forever. There are some staff who are going to stay at your organization forever, but that's the minority. Most staff are going to move on from your organization. Many are going to move on from the field. How can you support them as much as possible while they're with you? How can you help them reach their goals?

Sometimes we get really narrow-minded and the training opportunities and the professional development opportunities we provide are only allowed if they match exactly any item that's in a job description, but that's really narrow-minded.

We want to help our staff grow. We want to help them grow from that position, whether it's with us or with someone else or even in another field.

Be generous and creative in how you can support your team. Don't assume what those goals are. There are staff who are interested in starting their own nonprofits. There are also staff who are interested in starting their own food trucks. Or becoming a runway model, which is something I found out about one of the social work interns I supervised.

It really surprised me! I've supervised dozens of social work interns over the years and when I ask them what they want to do, I've come to expect them to say something in social work.

When one of my interns said they were working really hard to be a runway model, it was a surprise to me. Now, I didn't know the first thing about runway modeling and I still don't. I couldn't provide a lot in terms of resources or advice but it was something very important to them. So I made sure to ask her about it and talk with her about it and think about skills that were transferable from the job they were doing and the job they hoped to have.

On the surface, it might seem like being a runway model has nothing to do with being a social worker. Or if one of your staff is an after-school associate or manager or coordinator and their long-term goal is to be a chef or an accountant or whatever. It might seem like there's nothing in common, but there are certain skills that are pretty much universal no matter what job you have.

Like leadership skills.

And being a good communicator.

Being organized and learning how to prioritize.

In addition to understanding their professional goals, it will really benefit you in your relationship with your staff to understand what their values are.



These are going to show up in how they show up in their role.

Is their value to do things independently and not ask for help?

Is their value to collaborate and work with other people?

Is their value to speak up and make sure their voice is heard?

Or is it a value of theirs to sit back and defer to other people?

Sometimes it's hard for people to articulate their values, but in their actions, they can become easier to see.

So when you think about each member of your team, do you know what their goals are? Not just what's on their performance review, but what are they trying to do professionally in the future? What are their values and how is that showing up in their work?

I love this quote from Henry Ford who said, 'The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave is not training them and having them stay.'

If people are going to leave, they are going to leave, but if you're able to provide value for them to stay, then you might just be able to hold on to them a little bit longer because they know that you support them. If you have a broader view not just at your own organization, but when you think about your role as a leader helping this person become a better professional whether they stay with you or not, that is a huge gift that you can give to them.

Do not get so concerned about training people who leave that you decide not to train them at all. They'll leave anyway, or worse still they'll stay and not be trained. So commit to investing in your staff. Do so as much as possible based on their interests, their goals, and their values and I promise you they're going to stick around much longer than they would if you did the opposite.

The other whys that are important to understand about your staff are their communication styles, their working styles, and their preferences.

It's important to ask these questions outright.

You can even do it as soon as you hire somebody.

*How do you like to get feedback?*

*How do you like to be praised?*

*How do I know when you need help?*



*Do you like to brainstorm with other people or do you like to sit in a quiet office and think of things on your own?*

These are important questions to ask but sometimes people's self-awareness isn't that fine-tuned yet when we ask questions like this. Sometimes we get answers they think we want to hear so pay attention to what they say and especially pay attention to what they do- how they communicate, how they work, what they're showing you they prefer and do your best as a leader to accommodate that.

So something for you to think about is, what does your staff care about?