

THE PEOPLE'S POWER

What do your staff really think? Knowing is half the battle.

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Shelters are rightly centered on caring for their animals. But according to Steven Rogelberg, who heads the Shelter Diagnostic System, if you want your organization to be more effective, you have to bring the staff needs into focus as well.





LATELY WHEN YOU COME TO WORK, THERE SEEMS TO BE A BAD MOOD IN THE AIR, HANGING OVER THE SHELTER LIKE A RAIN CLOUD.

The adoptions staff seem grouchy, and you're not sure why. Are they mad about the change that was made to the policy on verifying landlord approvals for pets? Are they upset because intake is up? Maybe it's something more personal.

In the kennels, the techs seem to be getting along, but one of them is still angry about the decision to euthanize a dog she'd grown attached to but who needed a hip surgery that the organization just couldn't afford.

The staffer who runs the cat socialization team is about to move to Kentucky, and two others have been vying to take her place. One of them has incredible cat-handling skills and a bond with the kitties that's so strong she practically prowls. But the other team members go silent whenever she talks at meetings.

Your animal control officer has begun to leave passive-aggressive notes in the break room about the fact that shelter staff drink all the coffee and then don't brew more, making him wait for a cup when he needs to get on the road.

Overall, morale just seems to be mysteriously low. You keep wondering why.

Last year, your shelter took in several large boa constrictors and even had to house an ostrich for a couple of days. The small animal room was briefly home to a kinkajou.

But caring for the needs of these exotic creatures presented nowhere near the ongoing complexities of managing human beings in a way that keeps them satisfied, fulfilled, and focused on the shelter's mission.

Taking Your Shelter's Pulse

If you want to help the animals in your shelter, you can't neglect the creatures who are caring for them.

That's one message that Steven Rogelberg would like to impart to the animal welfare world.

Rogelberg, a professor and director of organizational science at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, heads the Shelter Diagnostic System (SDS), an initiative that aims

to make shelters healthier and more effective by surveying employees on key workplace issues.

The SDS survey won't ask about your protocols for cleaning cat cages or controlling disease outbreaks. Instead, it focuses on how employees view the experience of working for your organization, Rogelberg explains. Employees give their opinions on how well management communicates. On how well internal departments work together. On whether volunteers are appropriately trained and placed. On pay, work stress levels, euthanasia practices. After the results are tabulated, the SDS team presents findings and assists with a plan for improvement.

The SDS is designed for public or private animal welfare organizations with at least 10 full-time or part-time employees (considered the minimum number to protect the anonymity of the respondents). The survey can be done online, and Rogelberg recommends that organizations do the survey annually to ensure that they're staying on top of issues and not letting problems fester.

The concept is relatively new for shelters, but Rogelberg says successful businesses have long realized that they can gain a competitive advantage by taking care of their people.

"Shelters are in the Dark Ages in many regards," he notes, "because they get so caught up in the very noble mission of caring for the animals and the emergent issues associated with the animals that they forget that there's an inherent link between employee health and well-being and animal health and well-being."

A nonprofit project supported by grants from UNC Charlotte and The HSUS, the SDS started about a decade ago and has had about 50 clients, many of them repeat customers, and gathered input from more than 3,000 individual employees. In Rogelberg's view, the SDS is a bargain: It costs about 15 percent of what a consulting company would charge to assess similar issues. Looking at internal processes and problems is "just something healthy organizations do, period," Rogelberg says, likening the survey to a regular medical checkup. "These issues exist regardless of whether you ask about them or not."

The issues identified can usually be addressed without making radical changes. "A modest, realistic plan is exactly what's best," says Rogelberg.

Two repeat clients—Larimer Humane Society in Colorado and Edmonton Humane Society in Canada—have followed that model and become great SDS success stories, Rogelberg says. Both shelters took their initial results seriously and made essentially cost-free changes to their policies and procedures. “They looked at it as an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation that resulted in positive change,” he says. “And ... they didn’t try to change the world. Instead, they embraced a few things, and did those few things correctly.”

Looking Up in Larimer

Judy Calhoun, executive director at Larimer, a nonprofit shelter with about 55 full- and part-time staffers, thought that the SDS was especially appealing because it contains norms based on data that Rogelberg’s team has gathered over the years from dozens of animal welfare organizations. Results of the survey show where the individual organization falls within the scale of other organizations, helping provide a sense of where a group’s strengths and weaknesses lie.

Calhoun “really liked the idea that it had benchmarks that were relevant to the animal welfare industry, so that we weren’t necessarily comparing some of those satisfaction questions against businesses that were very, very different,” she says.



The Edmonton Humane Society, which moved from an outdated facility to a new, larger shelter with a more diverse work force, used the Shelter Diagnostic System to gauge employee wants and needs, then make improvements. The shelter has nearly 100 employees, including customer service representative Britney Rogers, left, and adoption counselor Ashley Falcon.

When Larimer administered the SDS survey in winter 2010, the results indicated that the shelter was reasonably healthy, but had room to improve, Calhoun says. The shelter ranked below industry norms in several areas, including letting employees have a say in how often they perform euthanasia, holding staff accountable for poor work, and considering employee input.

In response, the shelter held an in-service training day to talk about the euthanasia process and increased training for supervisors and managers on issues such as performance reviews and talking to staff about poor performance. The shelter also incorporated staff input into the hiring process, asking employees what skills make for a successful dispatcher or client services associate, for example, and what types of questions should be asked during job interviews.

The shelter holds quarterly, mandatory all-staff meetings. After administering the SDS, the shelter started gathering employee opinions following each quarterly all-staff meeting via an online survey, and structuring the next all-staff meeting according to employee feedback. If employees want to know more about the animal protection and control department, or how to respond to questions about wildlife, the appropriate staffer can address the next meeting.

And the Survey Says ...

When Larimer retook the SDS survey in winter 2011, “It was actually kind of amazing,” Calhoun says. Staff perceptions had improved by 5 percentage points or more in the favorability scores for about three-quarters of the questions, stayed flat on about a quarter of them, and declined on only two.

Employees had largely favorable views of their direct supervisors, teamwork within and across departments, the



An online survey for cats has yet to be developed, but the SDS uses web surveying to gather employee opinions to help make shelters more effective.

interpersonal and professional climate at work, and communication within departments, Calhoun notes. They also rated their direct supervisors highly for delegating work effectively, holding staff accountable, trying to find solutions to problems, and resolving employee conflicts.

On some questions, Larimer saw its positive scores jump substantially from the previous administration of the SDS. On the topic of direct supervisors holding staff accountable for poor work, for example, the agreement rating increased from 35 percent in 2010 to 61 percent in 2011. In 2010, 15 percent of employees felt they had a say in how often they perform euthanasia; that figure jumped to 42 percent in 2011.

Calhoun still sees areas where there's room for improvement. Larimer's agreement score declined by 9 percentage points on the question of whether employee roles and responsibilities are clear, and remained flat on such topics as whether employee skills are utilized and whether staff members have the equipment they need.

Only 26 percent of Larimer employees had a favorable view of their advancement opportunities—a figure that was the same in 2010 and is 4 percentage points below the industry norm. Shelters aren't Fortune 500 companies with management-level tracks, Calhoun notes, and many of them struggle to provide opportunities for employees to move up. Sometimes, she explains, no promotional path exists unless a shelter manager or director leaves.

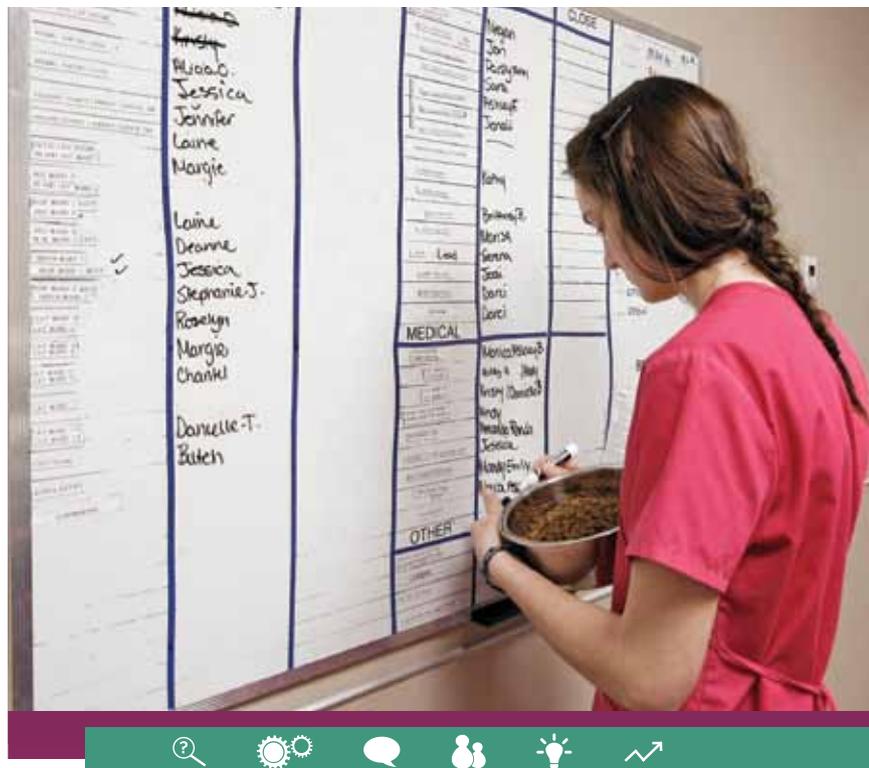
But the shelter is still working on improvements, planning to define skill levels for different positions, which might ultimately be tied to salary increases. An employee could start as a level 1 animal control officer, then move up to level 2 as they gain knowledge and obtain certifications showing that they've mastered certain skills. The shelter has also made online training available to all staff, so that employees can improve their supervisory skills and be ready if a supervisory position opens up—at Larimer or somewhere else, Calhoun says.

Assessment in Edmonton

Change was already in the air at Edmonton when CEO Stephanie McDonald heard a presentation by Rogelberg that made her think she might want to explore the SDS.

About three years ago, her shelter—the largest in Canada in terms of size and animal numbers—was in the midst of a capital campaign. The shelter had 34 staff and was housed in a decrepit, 15,000-square-foot building that McDonald says didn't allow for optimum care. Plans called for the development of a state-of-the-art, 47,000-square-foot facility with nearly 100 employees.

The impending move meant rapid change was about to hit the shelter, McDonald says. Management wanted to improve the public perception of the shelter “from this pathetic thing to this great organization,” and was trying to meet the staffing requirements to do that. But



the region had extremely low unemployment, leaving the pool of candidates shallow. “There was just nobody to hire. Everybody had jobs,” McDonald says. And when she did manage to hire new workers, they often got poached away by employers elsewhere.

The shelter turned to some unconventional sources to fill its personnel needs. Filipino workers, recruited to Canada as part of a government-backed effort to ease the labor shortage, joined the shelter staff. And while the shelter traditionally attracts young, entry-level workers, McDonald says she's also hired middle-aged people who can't yet afford to retire.

With her staff growing larger and more diverse in terms of age and ethnicity, McDonald wanted to gauge where they were at in the old building, and then retake the temperature once they were in the new one. Edmonton administered the SDS in January 2009 and again after the new shelter opened in April of that year.

For Edmonton's second SDS, management inserted a few survey questions designed to test if employees from different cultures viewed the shelter differently. As it turned out, that was not the case. “Everybody essentially sees things the same way. So that was really fantastic for us to know—that there's a lot of respect and dignity within our organization,” McDonald says. “... It's extremely valuable from a management perspective, because you want to make sure, if you have a diverse group, that everybody's treated the same, and feels treated the same.”

Communication is always a challenge in animal shelters, says Edmonton Humane Society CEO Stephanie McDonald. White boards tracking employee activities, like the one being used here by Edmonton animal care attendant Brittany Stevenson, help keep everyone in the loop.

Animal care attendant Jennifer Nelson fills food dishes at the Edmonton Humane Society, which has used the Shelter Diagnostic System to gather employee opinions about the workplace and to tweak policies and procedures to create a more effective shelter.



McDonald notes that the initial decision to take a hard look at your operation can be daunting—in fact, it “scared the bejeebers” out of her. “A lot of us are a little bit afraid of finding out how healthy you are or not,” she notes. “And of course there’s always that really big concern of ‘How’s the board going to look at it?’ ... It takes a lot of courage for CEOs to take this step.”

And she points out that it’s not just a single step. The SDS “is a really fantastic diagnostic tool,” and a way to ensure that the staff has a voice in the shelter environment—but management has to follow through on the findings.

Calhoun concurs: “If you don’t want to make any changes, then don’t do it. By doing it and then not taking the results seriously, you actually set yourself up ... essentially to have your employees more disappointed.”

Be Transparent

When conducting the process, the staff needs to know that management has no hidden agenda, McDonald says, and that their answers will remain confidential. At Edmonton, management tried to set up a culture for employees to accept change. The leaders talked to the staff about why they were undertaking the SDS, and how the process would work. Rogelberg makes sure to tell shelters they’re not “failing” at anything. Instead, the SDS shows how a shelter is doing compared to others, and identifies opportunities for growth.

After its initial survey, Edmonton learned that it had some communication difficulties within the organization, with some groups working in silos. McDonald says management took that information back to the staff and asked how to fix it. Solutions can’t be devised by managers alone, she notes; the rank-and-file staff have to explain what they need. “From a manager perspective, if you jam things down people’s throats, it’s going to be pushed away, right?” McDonald says. “But if it’s their idea, and then they’re buying into it, you will be more successful.”

In this case, the staff wanted things like an internal newsletter, individual email accounts, and message boards. Keeping everyone in the loop has become a part of the Edmonton shelter’s culture that staff must work to maintain, McDonald says.

A whopping 93 percent of Edmonton’s employees gave the organization a favorable score on the second SDS—well above the industry norm of 70 percent. “The staff love the work,” McDonald says. “They’re scraping poop, and they’re happy here, which is really phenomenal.”

Calhoun notes that the SDS results don’t always paint a flattering picture, and they can be difficult for some shelter executives to confront. “Sometimes this is about you. And that can be hard,” she says. “... But, again, I think that’s part of our jobs—part of what we should be doing to help our organization.”

She cautions shelters to avoid thinking that their daily dilemmas prevent them from stepping back to see the bigger, long-term picture. “I think that’s sometimes the mindset that we get into—is that it’s so hard to do the day-to-day, how can we think of improving tomorrow?” Calhoun says. “And my feeling is that if we don’t think about improving tomorrow, then the day-to-day is never going to get any better.”

Rogelberg, who has evaluated many types of workplaces, finds shelters wonderful to work with, but notes that they’re often hesitant to jump in and give a diagnostic tool a shot, and “they sometimes forget that they can just do a few steps and make very positive change.” It’s possible for shelters to get overwhelmed by the SDS results, he notes, instead of working with his team to identify a few simple changes. He encourages shelters to remember that by administering the SDS, “you’re taking a step back to take two steps forward.” **AS**

To inquire about the Shelter Diagnostic System, email sds@uncc.edu or call 704-687-4871. For more information, go to sds.uncc.edu.

