

***Animal Vocation Resources, LLC***  
***Case Studies***  
***Animal Sheltering Series***

**Case Study #1: It Takes a Village: Addressing interdepartmental conflicts**

**Target areas: staff conflicts, organizational cohesion and effectiveness**

***Scenario:***

An executive director (E.D.) of a mid-size humane society believes in interdepartmental communication and collaboration, and fosters regular department head meetings and routine organization-wide email and memo communication. Despite these efforts, he notices that managers are not taking the initiative as much as he would like to collaborate on projects, and when collaborative meetings do occur, there is little follow-through or an action plan. For their part, many departmental managers feel that communications with other departments are strained; for example, the shelter manager feels frustrated by what he perceives as a lack of understanding by the PR and development departments of shelter needs, both in terms of program resources and in day-to-day operations. In turn, PR and development feel left out of the loop on current activities and news from the shelter department. Finally, shelter associates feel their jobs are harder than their counterparts in the administrative offices, and administrative staff feel that their contribution is undervalued because it doesn't involve direct animal care.

Can't we just all get along??

***Some Questions to Ponder:***

- 1) Do interdepartmental meetings truly address a specific objective, or are they simply discussions of vague ideas? Who directs the meetings to ensure they stay on course?
- 2) Which managers/departments work well together, and which do not? Can you identify the factors that contribute to good relationships, and those that may impact poor working relationships?
- 3) Does the senior leadership team honor equally the contributions of all departments, and communicate successes of each department to all staff members?
- 4) Does the organization have an orientation program that explains the role of each department?
- 5) Is each objective of the organization viewed holistically, or do departments tend to work autonomously?

*Discussion:*The Challenge:

Some humane organizations are structured so that departments work autonomously, with very little meaningful contact between employees of different departments. Moreover, the functions of each department, and the roles of departmental employees, may only be clear to the employees that work in that department. This results in misunderstandings between departments; lost opportunities for collaboration; and sometimes resentment and conflict between departments.

Key Principle:

Increasingly, the mission of a humane organization is seen as a holistic process in which core objectives consist of an interrelated and sometimes complex set of activities and goals that collectively accomplish the mission. This typically means that each department must work in concert with each other in order to achieve the mission, and this is most effectively done if all employees recognize that the contribution of each employee and department is key to organizational success, similar to the way in which each musician and instrument group (e.g. strings, horns, percussion) work together to make beautiful music in an orchestra. The more employees understand the role of each department, the more successful the organization will be in achieving its mission.

Suggestions:

- 1) Incorporate information about the role of each department in the orientation program for all employees. Emphasize during the interview process and the orientation that interdepartmental collaboration is considered key to the organization's success.
- 2) Managers of different departments who are experiencing conflict in working together should set up a meeting to air grievances and find common ground. If the relationship has become particularly contentious, mediation by a third party will likely be helpful.
- 3) A project leader should be designated for each interdepartmental project. This individual is responsible for keeping meetings on task; for ensuring that each departmental representative has an assignment; for ensuring that assigned tasks are completed by each team member; and for mediating any conflicts between team members or departments. This can also be a good way for mid-level managers to enhance their leadership skills.
- 4) Initiating a shadowing program in your organization can help foster understanding of departmental roles and challenges. Shadowing involves an employee from one department spending a designated amount of time in another department and working side-by-side with a member of that department. By spending some time in a fellow staff member's shoes, an employee can gain a real sense of how that employee and the department contribute to the organization's mission- and how that department and the employee's department work together. Beyond fostering understanding, these types of exchanges can also prompt new ideas for collaborative activities.
- 5) The E.D. can continue to place a focus on demonstrating how all departments fit together like pieces solving the pet population puzzle each time the organization embarks on an interdepartmental project. Moreover, employees from one department should be asked to report the successes and contributions of another department. This creates heightened awareness of departmental contributions and challenges and fosters a sense of appreciation between departments. Recognition of achievement is often more meaningful if it's coming from someone outside of your department. Appreciation Days that celebrate the role of a single department (and rotate through each department in the organization) can also be a festive way to honor what each department brings to the success of the organization.

*Proposed Resolution:*

Upon embarking on a major new initiative to promote adoption of older animals, the E.D. put together a task force with representatives of each department, and designated a project leader. From the start, this project was seen as a priority for the entire organization, and not just the shelter department. Each department contributed ideas and had specific actions plans towards the goal. The crucial contribution of each department was highlighted in communications distributed to all employees and volunteers. A shadowing program demonstrated why an interdepartmental effort was so critical to this program, and at a major adoption awareness and fundraiser event for the program, employees from different departments worked together effectively. At a meeting evaluating the program's effectiveness (a 50% decrease in length of stay of older animals prior to adoption), the shelter manager outlined the contributions of the development team, and the PR staff mentioned the role of volunteers as ambassadors for the program. The meeting ended with new ideas for program expansion, and an enthusiastic introductory discussion regarding the next interdepartmental project.