Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention

The Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP) is a volunteer-driven, non-profit, community-based organization. Formed in 1987, Black CAP works in partnership with like-minded organizations and individuals to reduce the spread of HIV infection within Toronto's black communities and to enhance the quality of life of black people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

The scope and variety of the services offered by Black CAP have grown substantially over the past two decades. The organization currently operates with an annual budget of $1 million. Executive Director Shannon Ryan, who has been with the organization since 2006, notes that Black CAP is fortunate to have a good relationship with the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care which has supported it since its inception and still provides 45% of Black CAP's funding through an annual operating grant. The balance of funds is secured through a combination of shorter term grants from municipal and federal governments and targeted foundations, and through some fundraising. He admits challenges exist in the area of individual fundraising because HIV/AIDS is still stigmatized, and lacks the cachet of other causes. Nevertheless, Ryan characterizes the organization's financial health as “on the verge of being robust.” Black CAP's policy-governance board is true to its role in having two primary purposes – to set policy direction and to supervise the Executive Director. It is highly committed to the organization and very supportive of Ryan and his staff.

Like most non-profits, Black CAP has struggled to keep up with the workload. An initial cohort of volunteers eventually grew to include a full-time project manager and part-time outreach worker. Today, Black CAP has a paid staff of 19 – ten full-time employees and nine part-time employees and works with about 75 volunteers.

The challenge: Planning and managing organizational growth through a staffing structure that works

The most recent growth spurt occurred after Ryan was hired as the ED. Turnover at the governance level enabled the revitalized board to identify that:

There were gaps in the programs and services Black CAP was offering, relationships with funders and potential funders were in need of nurturing and human resources. Staff roles and responsibilities required clarification and a means of determining how best to use staff to address emerging opportunities that needed to be made a priority.

In the 18 years that Black CAP has been in operation, a number of new funding programs had been created to address HIV/AIDS. Short of staff, Black CAP was unable to take full advantage of these opportunities. Initially, Ryan worked to secure some of this newly available funding, and then hired staff to deliver on the funders' requirements. This led to a major increase in the number of staff over a very short period of time. The growth, Ryan admits, impacted more than the

bottom line. Black CAP's flat management structure meant that each new hire represented another direct report for him. With 12 direct reports and the responsibility for the entire operation, Ryan was not always able to provide staff with an optimal level of supervision and support. Moreover, the increased time spent on management and supervision meant he had to devote less time and energy to the other parts of his portfolio. Something had to give.

The solution came in the form of a human resources collaboration. In 2006, Black CAP joined six other AIDS service organizations in the downtown Toronto area to address their common need for HR support. Recognizing that individually they could not afford the services of a senior-level manager, yet acknowledging that the issues they were struggling with required just that, they applied for and received a three year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to hire HR consultant Tracy Campbell. Ryan characterizes the services provided by Campbell as an "HR Help Desk PLUS." The seven EDs meet regularly with Campbell to review collective HR concerns such as compensation, recruitment and retention, and discuss strategies to address them. She is also available to the agencies individually; they can call on her on an as-needed basis to work on specific initiatives, to obtain feedback or just to test or brainstorm ideas. For example, Black CAP brought Campbell in to help with a recent round of collective bargaining and to assist with the development of a process to identify Organizational Competencies (i.e. skills, knowledge, attitudes, values that are necessary for employees to have or to be able to develop to be an effective member of Black CAP's staff team). Campbell also provides training and coaching services. The HR Collaboration has given Black CAP access to high-quality HR advice and support that the organization would be unable to afford on its own. Moreover, this support has allowed Shannon to develop a better understanding of what type of HR management systems and overall HR structure would best serve the organization. And, the coaching and mentoring he has received is enabling him to build an effective staffing structure and through a cascading model share his newly acquired skills and knowledge with his direct reports who in turn share them with staff reporting to them.

Working with Campbell helped Ryan realize that, in order to grow and thrive, Black CAP required a different staff configuration. He saw that "with a staff of 19, I could have been spending all my time on HR" which just wasn't realistic. He determined that by changing the staffing structure, the organization would be able to support its people better (i.e. more direct support in the form of meeting time, feedback, coaching, mentoring, etc.), meet the needs of its clients better, and he, as ED, would be able to devote more time to strategic and operational planning. Black CAP created a Program Director position that assumed line responsibility for eight staff, thereby reducing the Executive Director's number of direct reports to five. Vesting program responsibility in one person also gives that area the capacity to develop a departmental strategy that encompasses the work of the different coordinators, already stretched to the limit with program delivery. This strategy provides an umbrella under which program coordinators can "hang" their individual work plans. Previously siloed, individual program plans are now linked to the departmental strategy. This enables the coordinators to see how their collective effort supports the overall organizational vision and

mission; and also facilitates sharing information, outcomes and successes with the community and with funders.

With the Program Director in place, the Executive Director can now effectively support his direct reports and focus on developing and maintaining strategic relationships with funders and sector partners to ensure the organization's sustainability. By centralizing the program roles and functions, the Executive Director is also able to develop and maintain the high level perspective that is required to keep the organization on track. As a result, Black CAP is better positioned within the black community it serves, the HIV/AIDS service community and the broader community of which it is a part.

Good HR management practices

The average period of time an employee spends at Black CAP is three to five years. Like other non-profit leaders Ryan recognizes he cannot compete with the private and public sectors in terms of financial compensation or career path opportunities within the organization. At the same time, he is aware of the high-cost of turnover in terms of impact on staff left behind, the ongoing need to train new staff, and the additional supervision required. With those realities in mind, Ryan, supported by his board, has made an effort to offer other non-financial benefits to staff. These efforts appear to be paying off.

Recruiting for diversity
Recognizing that the population it serves itself has disabilities (i.e., HIV, compromised health), Black CAP makes a conscious effort to hire people with HIV. Many people with HIV/AIDS continue to experience workplace discrimination and have difficulty securing and retaining jobs. Black CAP also puts the organization's values into practice by hiring new Canadians and landed immigrants who may have difficulty finding work in Canada without Canadian work experience and by giving younger workers a first/meaningful employment opportunity.

Offering benefits that meet staff needs
Black CAP is a member of OASSIS, a benefits plan for nonprofit organizations in Canada. Through the plan, Black CAP employees and their families receive medical/dental coverage and complementary medicine, as well as access to an Employee Assistance Program. When Ryan joined the organization in 2006, individual coverage for prescription medication was capped at $1,000 per year. This was woefully inadequate for individuals with medical conditions such as HIV, whose prescription costs could run in excess of $10,000 annually. The new plan does not have a cap. Black CAP employees are provided with flex days when they need them and similarly can ask for extra vacation time. Management and board recognize employees work extremely hard and are dedicated to the cause and to the organization and feel this is one way in which they can acknowledge this commitment. According to Ryan, abuse of the system is rare.

Focusing on employee development
While employees may not be with the organization for the long-term, Ryan works hard to acknowledge their contributions. He meets with individuals and asks them where they see themselves in terms of their careers five years from now; he also helps them to develop the skills and experience they need to achieve that vision for the future. In the short-term the organization benefits, as the employee becomes increasingly competent; in the long-term the broader community benefits, as the employee moves to another workplace. And, Black CAP's hope is that these employees remain long term champions and supporters of the organization - as volunteers, as funders, and perhaps, as third party endorsers in the community.

Ryan is effusive in his support for the organization's staff as he points to their individual and collective commitment to Black CAP, their professionalism, their willingness to go the extra mile whenever it is required. He points out that while it is true that the organization's management and board are very supportive of the staff, he acknowledges that Black CAP's achievements and success are directly attributable to the dedicated staff. The staff understand the organization can never match salaries and benefits of the private sector but they also know management and the board have worked hard to provide the other benefits that are offered and continue to identify new ways to recognize employees. And, in the end, the collective vision for the organization they all share enables an enviable management/staff working relationship evidenced by the recent round of collective bargaining which was completed in record time without any hint of acrimony.

Black CAP appears to have turned a corner. Through the support of an effective HR collaboration, a committed management, staff and board team it has made the transition from a somewhat haphazard organic HR structure to one that demonstrates forethought and a focus on supporting its mission. In the process Ryan has developed skills and acquired knowledge that are immediately and directly benefiting the organization and its employees. He is confident that the HR management system he has been able to put in place with support from Tracy Campbell, the board and from staff has enhanced Black CAP's capacity to carry out its mission more effectively while supporting its staff.

For further information, watch the case study on:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y451szqY_I0

Source: HR Council. "Workplaces that Work Case Study #1: Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention" Access February 9th, http:// http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/BlackCAP-Case-Study.cfm.