



IACCA PERSPECTIVES

FOUNDATIONAL RESOURCES FOR TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL

Human Resources

Human Resources: Let's Talk More about that Bus!

By Kathleen Trotter

We now have the answer to our frustration over human resources... "Get the right people on the bus." The oft-quoted piece of wisdom comes from Jim Collin's best seller, **Good to Great**. Most conference center directors, whether they have read the book or not, understand what Collins is saying with this analogy. Every CEO, every center, every organization, is only as strong as the people who lead and serve in it.

The phrase is bantered about freely as conference center directors, staff or board members discuss the challenges they have with personnel. The dialogue generally follows a pattern... complaint that personnel just don't live up to expectations, analysis of the issues, ideas for solving the problems, and then someone says it, "We've just got to get the right people on the bus!" There you have it! End of conversation... as if it were just that easy.

Jim Collins does offer much good advice as he uses this analogy to speak of the people power in an organization. His explanation in the 1990's book is extensive and integral to the rest of his principles for greatness. Even better for those of us in the not-for-profit world is his 2005 monologue, **Good to Great and the Social Sectors**. If you have not read this little 40-page follow-up, you MUST. It stands alone as one of the most insightful pieces of research, analysis and direction for non-profit organizations published in the last decade.

One of the reasons Collin's monologue is so helpful is that it is sympathetic to the particular challenges that non-profits face –

- the political relationships that must be recognized in hiring and all management decisions;
- the need to have a passion for the effort as well as the skills to do the job;
- the lack of resources to "buy talent."

Nevertheless, he offers powerful examples of persons who have addressed the challenges and have built

Key Point #1 – The "right person" is very specific to the size of the center operation

Key Point #2 – Your "culture" will have more influence than your formal information

Key Point #3 – Hiring in a crisis mode significantly reduces the likelihood that you will hire the right person

Key Point #4 – Don't jeopardize the whole organization by holding on to a wrong decision

greatness in their organization through securing quality persons, placing those individuals in strategic roles according to need and capability.

To recap, these are some points that Jim Collins makes about "getting the right people on the bus", within social sector constraints.

- Getting the right people on the bus requires "a culture of discipline" that ultimately becomes normative for the entire organization.
- In addition to getting the right people on the bus, we must get "the wrong people off the bus, and the right people into the right seats."
- A "lack of resources is no excuse for lack of rigor" in this matter. Rather, it "makes selectivity all the more vital."

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The directives hold their own as advice and encouragement for all who hire personnel in centers. But there are some other considerations that affect whether or not the "bus" actually goes down the road to the destination. The phrase suggests that the primary task is to HIRE WELL, and to assign roles appropriately. These are critical matters, but in my observation, there are other factors that can send even a bus full of competent people, maybe even appropriately assigned, down a dead-end road.

1. THE "RIGHT PERSON" IS VERY SPECIFIC TO THE SIZE OF THE CENTER OPERATION.

We are fortunate in IACCA to have persons who will share freely their experience and expertise about managing centers. However, we need to be very careful that what we borrow is applicable to our situation. I observe that one source of frustration in hiring personnel – and potentially a way to help a very competent person fail miserably at a role — is using a model for the position that doesn't fit the need or the budget of the center operation.

Let's think about the requirements of personnel for a center of 4,000 guest days compared to a center of 25,000 guest days. It's not that the daily tasks of housekeeping or food service or administration are so different. But a center of 25,000 guest days is both more complex and has greater resources than a center of 4000 guest days. Especially because of the resources, the larger center generally hires *specialists* for each one of the functional areas. But a center of 4,000 guest days cannot afford a specialist in bookkeeping and reservations and guest services, or both a cook and a food service director. Therefore at least the key staff must be generalists who supervise multiple areas of responsibility, and who quite likely DO many of the related tasks, not just supervise them. The SIZE of a center greatly affects who the right people are to get on YOUR bus.

If you're a small center...

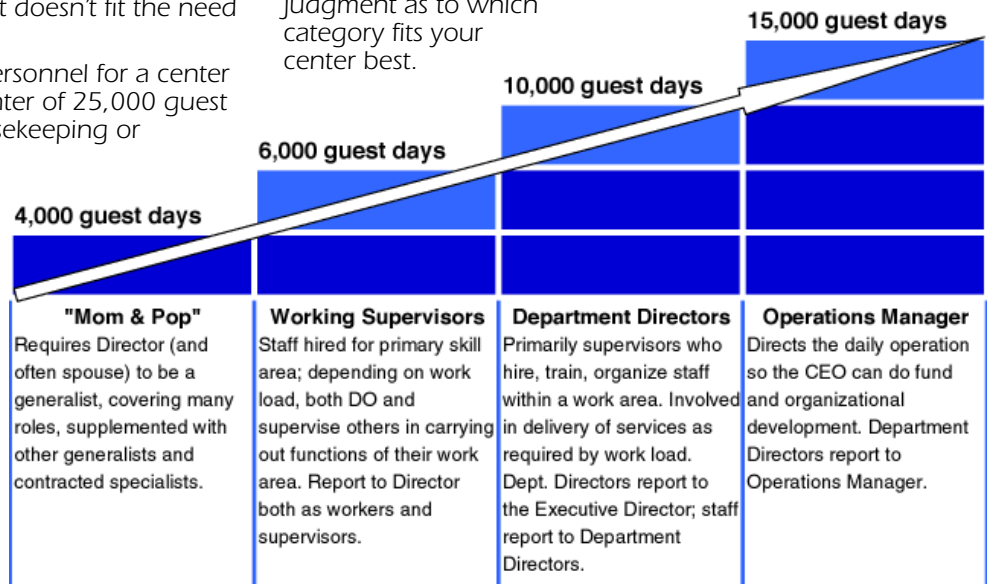
- How do you find a Guest Services Director who is also good at writing contracts and doing occasional housekeeping?
- How do you know that the applicant for Property Manager really does understand that on a regular schedule he will be a guest host and occasionally dishwasher?
- How does a Board find a Director with capabilities ranging from fixing plumbing to raising funds from wealthy donors?

If you're a large center...

- How do you determine whether applicants can MANAGE tasks and people when their primary experience has been to DO the tasks?

- How do you keep from getting "top heavy" with management as you hire additional supervisory staff?
- How do you keep the passion for the mission alive in the workforce as you add more people and layers to the personnel charts?

Over the past 20 years, I have observed that there are particular models for management that are appropriate for centers of various sizes. Each model requires different skills and attitudes on the part of the Director as well as the staff that carry out the functions of the center. And if a center is growing, the roles and needs CHANGE when the center reaches a different stage. Following are my descriptions of the management stages and the approximate break points that I have observed. These break points measured in guest days will vary if the center serves exclusively adults (at adult rates) or is a camp/conference center with some of the guest days at camper rates. Use your judgment as to which category fits your center best.



We can learn from each other...but need to be very careful to apply the right model for staffing which will be very different depending on our size. It is a common reason that we get the wrong person on the bus – because the perception of THE BUS is not accurate.

2. YOUR "CULTURE" WILL HAVE MORE INFLUENCE THAN YOUR FORMAL INFORMATION.

The Human Resources KCW emphasizes the importance of having quality position descriptions, training that prepares staff members for their roles, a personnel handbook, on-going staff meetings, and a variety of other ways to form and inform persons about what and how they are expected to live in the center. (Note the outline on the back page.)

These personnel practices are a critical means of conveying expectations, but they can be quickly over-ridden by communal actions and attitudes that are contrary to the formal messages. For example, the mission statement indicates that service to guests is the top priority, but...

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- conversations around the coffee machine or the staff dining table belittle guests' needs and deride their motivations.
- the key factor in setting the schedule for meals, resources, etc. is what is convenient for staff.
- criticism on the evaluation forms is met with excuses... "If they would just send their requests in two weeks ahead like they're supposed to, we'd be happy to accommodate" or dismissal of the complaint... "they just don't understand."

"Culture" is a very elusive thing. It is the accumulation of habitual behaviors, spontaneous and traditional, that reflect the corporate attitude and perspective of a group of people. It is represented by words, actions, symbols, dress and even expressions. And it is powerful!

All the written information in the world will not change a culture that does not genuinely reflect an appreciation for guests and service to them. It is very important, once the "right person" is identified and willing to jump on the bus, to assure that they are absorbed into a culture that will enable them to offer their best to the organization. It is a sad occasion when the right person IS hired and on the bus, but they either learn bad habits from the culture surrounding them, or become disgusted with the environment and shortly leave the organization.

3. HIRING IN A CRISIS MODE SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCES THE LIKELIHOOD THAT YOU WILL HIRE THE RIGHT PERSON.

If the organization has developed "a culture of discipline" (Collins) it should have enough stability and flexibility to not be totally dependant upon one role being filled immediately.

Organizing and reorganizing the human resources of the center is an on-going process necessary to building a vital and viable operation. Getting the right person on the bus is not about the hiring practices alone. It is about having the ability to take as long as is required to fill a position with truly the RIGHT person.

Certainly this takes creativity when a person leaves. However, it also demands the understanding and expectation that no person is ever permanent in an organization. Therefore, **planning for transition** should always be a part of management. No one can guarantee that an individual will not get sick, will not be hurt, will not have a life situation that calls them from the job. Planning how to cover every role in the center for the period of time required to get "the right person on the bus" is essential for an organization that wishes to achieve great outcomes. It means aligning the human resources and cross training the people sufficiently that there are always options for absorbing functions other than hiring "the best" of an inadequate pool of applicants.

4. DON'T JEOPARDIZE THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION BY HOLDING ON TO A WRONG DECISION.

Jim Collins leaves us with a final challenge:

In the social sectors, where getting the wrong people off the bus can be more difficult than in a business, early assessment mechanisms turn out to be more important than hiring mechanisms. There is no perfect interviewing technique, no ideal hiring method, even the best executives make hiring mistakes. You can only know for certain about a person by working with that person.

And so the final challenge is to be willing to acknowledge when the wrong person has been brought onto the bus and to have the courage and the process to keep that mistake from causing the entire team to go down the wrong road.

It is not pessimism to establish "what if" opportunities... What if the newly hired Marketing Director doesn't find the role to be at all what he expected? What if the person, who was so effective in a past role, just can't produce outcomes in this role?

It's about matches, not the worth of the person. It is critical to establish EARLY assessment systems that set expectations for how you want the person to perform, and how performance will be measured. From a personal perspective, the most painful human resources problems have come from my believing that when a person didn't perform initially, they would eventually get it. Sometimes they did – IF I gave specific feedback and training. Certainly they didn't change if I did not speak up. Often my very initial observation that this was a mismatch was never altered, and the longer I waited to address MY error in judgment, the more painful it was for everyone.

On a final note, we must remember why it is critical to have the right people on the bus – because the mission of our centers provides life-defining opportunities for thousands of persons looking for meaning, for respite, for caring, for a way to make sense of their world. That's the BUS we get on and ride together.

About the Author

Kathleen Trotter is president and consultant for KALEIDOSCOPE Inc. She gained her appreciation for the value AND complexity of conference and retreat center operations as she spent 15 years directing camps and centers for three United Methodist annual conferences. She formed the consulting firm in 1986 to bring to camps and centers professional services from the perspective of planners who KNOW camps and centers. She is continually amazed at the multitude of ways that centers meet human needs, and is passionate about developing the most effective organizations that enable these missions to become reality.

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About the IACCA's Human Resources KCW

If you have not taken the Human Resources KCW, do so soon. These are the topics covered:

I. PERSONNEL THEORIES

- A. Personnel – It takes people (you can't do it all yourself)
- B. Leadership styles
- C. Creating a working culture
- D. Characteristics of a good supervisor
- E. Categories of conference center personnel

II. JOB DESCRIPTIONS

- A. Paid and volunteer job description
- B. Framework for evaluation
- C. Salary structure

III. RECRUITING AND RETAINING EMPLOYEES

- A. Recruiting
- B. Hiring
- C. Training
- D. Coaching and mentoring
- E. Supervision
- F. Documentation
- G. Evaluation and ongoing supervision
- H. Termination

IV. POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

- A. Employee handbook
- B. Relevant legislation
- C. Categories of employees
- D. Employee health and safety
- E. Benefits

V. RESIDENTIAL EMPLOYEES

- A. History
- B. Convenience of the employer
- C. Care, appearance and residence inspection
- D. Written residence agreement with the employee
- E. IRS / tax regulations

VI. COMMUNICATION

- A. The most important function of HR management
- B. Written notes and memoranda
- C. Staff meetings

VII. LIABILITY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

- A. Documentation
- B. Legal action

VIII. CONTINUING EDUCATION

- A. Reading list
- B. Periodicals
- C. Web sites
- D. Professional memberships and conferences

KEY COMPETENCY AREA (KCW) provides an overview of the contact area with which a Conference Center Administrator should be familiar. *Human Resources* is one of six KCW's that is offered as part of the Certification Program IACCA offers through the Education Committee.

For more information on becoming a Certified Conference Center Administrator please contact:

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About IACCA

The International Association of Conference Center Administrators (IACCA) is an association of nonprofit conference center professionals committed to education, professionalism, and support.

1. IACCA offers educational opportunities for its members and for those with whom they work.
2. IACCA promotes professional excellence in nonprofit conference center leadership, administration, and operation.
3. IACCA provides a supportive community that facilitates the sharing of knowledge and experience and the addressing of common challenges.