

Preventing Staff Turnover Within Healthy Marriage Programs

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Staff turnover is one of the leading concerns among employers. Losing experienced staff can affect the ability to meet program and organizational goals. The cost of turnover rises depending on the level of the position with the organization. These costs can range from 30 to 50% of yearly salaries for entry level jobs, up to 150% for mid-level, and as much as 400% for senior. This includes marriage education programs where up front training costs can be high, and good staff is needed for program success.

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Good hiring habits, workers liking their jobs, and helpful ways to rate job outputs are key to keeping staff (this is true for full time staff, contractors and volunteers). Letting all staff members know that the organization believes these to be important is a priority. This is especially key within marriage education where services are voluntary and recruitment can be a challenge. Keeping staff inspired and feeling valued can help improve their performance as well as hang on to them as employees.

Many marriage education programs use a volunteer model where “staff” may be paid a stipend or receive

free training. To keep good volunteers performing well, they should be treated as staff. Volunteers play a critical role in complementing the work of full time employees. This is especially true in the marriage education field. Good volunteers will often express a passion for the work they are being asked to do. To have a volunteer feel like he/she is a key part of the organization is important. Many of the tips below apply to a volunteer workforce.

How this can begin to be carried out is described below.

1. Matching the right person to the job is half the battle; giving an **aptitude test and/or a personality profile** can help with this task. While this adds costs up-front it can save organization money later. When pairing marriage educators, these tools can be very helpful so you balance those who are fun and engaging with those who ensure curriculum loyalty.



2. Often what can make a difference in the interview process for a healthy marriage staff person is the **“passion” factor** – what life experience makes this job important to the staff person you are hiring. Often their own life experiences will help them with the difficult issues that come up in marriage education workshops.
3. It is important that anyone interested in the job understand if it is a **“non-traditional” position**. Not all jobs are set hours. Will this eight to five job need the staff person to come in earlier, work later, or work some weekends? If you are recruiting and delivering services to couples, staff will likely have to work weekends and/or evenings to meet the needs of your clients. These needs must be dealt with when selecting staff.
4. The use of **performance-based work agreements** can help make certain that goals and results are clear to everyone (this is especially true if you use contracted employees). This helps the staff person and supervisor identify strengths and weaknesses in order to reach expected outcomes and allow for more effective supervision. It also helps to keep everyone responsible and keeps both parties familiar with what is needed to succeed. Remember, the couples you serve can be a great source of feedback on your staff’s performance.

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5. Supervision must be a priority that is supported by the whole chain of command. Too often the need for regularly **scheduled supervision** can be pushed to the side. This can lead to a reac-

tion or crisis response to an issue that could have been treated in a prevention-like manner. Supervising the supervisor is also critical. Regularly scheduled supervision times can keep staff turnover low and makes bottom up communication easier.

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6. Regular supervision makes the **yearly performance reviews** easier and less threatening, but it is important to keep in mind this is what usually triggers **yearly merit increases** (not to be confused with cost of living increases). The reliability of this review process can be improved by getting feedback from peer staff, community-based agency staff, and consumers of services, creating a “360 degree” review. The annual review is another way to give rewards and strengthen positive attitudes.
7. Job performance goals and results, when applied consistently, can be good team building. Closely beside accountability are rewards **for performance**. While verbal praise and certificates can often work as rewards, cash bonuses to units or departments within an organization for outstanding performance can aid working together as a team, and raise performance levels. This can also fill in for wages and/or benefits.
8. Policies can be designed so that when a job becomes open, a search within the organization will be done first. **Internal mobility** can include a move from one job to another without

a promotion or a job upgrade. An upgrade in a job is always seen as a reward for outstanding performance, and a message that the organization values its workers.

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9. A reward for staff also comes in the form of **professional staff development** and is not always on an as-needed basis. Again, this is a way for an organization to show how a staff person is valued, but at the same time can be seen as a win-win situation where the staff person's (or volunteer's) skills are bettered. This, in turn, strengthens the organization.

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10. A staff person's feelings about his/her **work environment** will have many effects on job results and desire to work for the organization. This has a lot to do with good connections between co-workers. This is shown by an attitude of shared caring and support between and among staff members of all levels in the organization. When these connections are made at the top they become common throughout the whole organization. Make sure staff members are "practicing what they preach" by using the same skills your program teaches couples. While staff may be thinking about other workplaces this kind of work environment will be missed.

11. Turnover of a facilitator or case manager can negatively affect the couple/family and result in poorer outcomes reports say. Efforts should be made to receive **advanced notice of turn-**

overs and allow for the chance to shift from the current case manager to the other thoroughly.

12. In marriage education workshops, it is common to have male/female **co-facilitators**. In some cases, people like to deliver workshops with their spouse. This is a management challenge because you then risk losing two staff members, instead of just one. Discourage the practice of hiring spouses to teach together. Pair them with another facilitator.