

An edited version of this article appeared in STRIDES Magazine in Fall 2004

**Hire in Haste, Repent at Leisure and other lessons in developing a great staff.**

By Bryan McQueeney

August 23, 2004

As the therapeutic riding industry has grown, finding and keeping staff has emerged as a real obstacle for many centers. Personnel issues traditionally have been a minefield of conflicting objectives involving personal satisfaction, economic survival, individual ego and arcane paperwork. Most of us who run centers want to deal with “people” not “personnel”. Fortunately, most of the people who work in our field - or want to work in it - share a common bond: all of us need to pay bills, all of us want to help, all of us want to make a difference. This bond gives us a framework for attracting potential colleagues and supporting them once they join our cause. Your success in finding and keeping staff will in large measure hinge on your ability to recognize what motivates your staff, crafting a position that taps into their best skills and how well you reconcile sometimes conflicting demands.

Staff: Where to find ‘em? How to keep ‘em?

As our industry expands, demand for qualified instructors and other support staff will continue to outstrip supply. Most of our success attracting and training staff has been a “grow your own” strategy. Recognize that every one of our centers is in a horse area and that our industry offers a phenomenally attractive working environment for horse people: not many employers give the opportunity to help people, work with horses and get a steady paycheck at a competitive wage.

The challenge to us as administrators is to put together a package and market ourselves to these talents in our own backyards. One of my head instructors was tired of riding other people's problem horses and was looking for a steady gig; my office manager took a 50% paycut because she loves the working environment at Ride On; maybe the key is flex-time to pick up your kid after school. Find out what motivates them and put a package together. If it's a priority for my organization, I do what it takes to make it happen.

Ride On had to find two senior instructors in a very short time when we opened a second ranch. First I found out what the prevailing wage was and paid it. As an industry, we cannot compete for the best staff if we consistently underpay ourselves. I lost one instructor once because our pay scale was too low. I failed to recognize how important a relatively small increase was for this young mother. If they are good employees, do what it takes to keep them.

One position was filled by advertising in the regional horse newspaper. The other was filled by word of mouth from volunteers. We did not worry about NARHA certification. We were looking for first-class horse people with good heads. This worked in our case because we had an extremely experienced Program Director who can train and mentor

them along. We used our Staff Development budget to get them certified. Our experience is that we can teach disability awareness and safety procedures rapidly; we have not yet found a substitute for years of experience when it comes to horses.

The learning curve is steep for any new employee and it takes time - several months to a year - to come fully up to speed. Build this into your performance expectations. Budget time for training. We routinely team up our best employees to mentor new hires. We did have one registered instructor come to us certified. It still took her months to get to know our system.

### **Adventures in Personnel Management: Tips from the Trenches.**

- Don't mistake availability for suitability. No matter how painful it is to be short a critical person, it is worse to put the wrong person in it. One Human Resources professional put it this way: "I only see one hiring mistake. It is when I hire from a position of desperation. If I don't forecast the need then I don't start looking until it's too late. The entire process is overwhelmed by a sense of urgency and what should be an enjoyable exercise of improving the organization for the long term becomes a race to fill the job now. Desperation drives all kinds of goofy behavior. "
- Recognize the cost of replacing someone. Often it is cheaper to re-design the job than it is to fire one person, interview and train a replacement only to find that they have a different set of weaknesses. Find your employee's strong suit and play to it. Use your staff development budget to invest in and strengthen your staff over time. The artful part is knowing when you truly have a "square peg in round hole" syndrome.
- Don't mistake enthusiasm for competence. People will volunteer for jobs which they cannot do and people will apply for jobs for which they are not qualified. One instructor came to us before we were advertising and volunteered in a number of capacities. We mis-took her enthusiasm for capability and placed her in a too-senior position which didn't last long. Ideally you spot these situations before they happen and get good at suggesting "I think you could help us best in this area..." More likely the problem will surface after a while at which time the sooner you address it, the better off you will be
- Promoting or changing individual roles can cause problems. We had two volunteers one of whom we "promoted" to paid staff. We chose the most qualified person at the expense of the volunteer who had been working with us much longer. As managers we have to have a clear vision for why we're making a choice – and a fair amount of tact - so you can explain your actions when they are questioned.
- Clarify organizational roles. Day to day, this may not mean much but if an epidemic of strangles goes through area ranches or a popular instructor quits or is fired, it is critical. If you have two employees with 30 years of horse experience who decides what? Figure that out in advance of trouble and stick to every time a mundane question arises. That way people are trained to go to the correct person and respect their decision.

- Empower employees in their area of expertise. Pick the best people you can find and let them run! Go out of your way to inform them of the plans for them and for the organization as a whole. They are the face of your organization, the more they know the better they can articulate your mission to the public and the more confidence they will have coming forward with ideas and innovations.
- Articulate employee's interests. Defend & praise in public; counsel in private.

Much of the art of hiring lies in your ability to strike a balance. A balance between saying "thank you for a job well done" and saying "this needs to be done a little different next time"; and a balance between your organization's need to deliver excellent programming and an individual's aspirations for their work and family. The daily challenge is to not lose sight of this balance under the press of daily events.

#### Nuts & Bolts:

- Have a written policy and procedure manual and follow it closely. It is ok to amend/add/change as needed. A sample is posted on the NARHA administrator's Yahoo listserve. Contact [executivedirector@littlebit.org](mailto:executivedirector@littlebit.org) for more information.
  - Set up employee files and folders to meet all the current state and federal regulations and laws.
  - Meet OSHA requirements: Have an Illness and Injury Prevention Plan; Make sure to have all your posters and hand outs in order. OSHA Posters are a must in each work site and you must keep an OSHA log and post it annually.
  - Follow state and federal requirements for new hires, terminations, and recordkeeping requirements (like timecards).
- Communicate expectations with your employees either through regular performance reviews or informal 3-minute feedback sessions.
- Set a policy on running background checks. At a minimum inquire about felony convictions.

*Bryan McQueeney is Co-founder and Executive Director of Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship in California. He has been active in therapeutic riding since 1984 serving as NARHA Region Representative, CALNET President and CALNET Show Manager. or e-mail: [bryan@rideon.org](mailto:bryan@rideon.org)*

### Pay & Benefits:

Compensation by itself is rarely the #1 priority. At the same time, it is important to be competitive with other social service agencies in the area so your pool of applicants is sufficiently skilled and so the morale of everyone is boosted in the long run. Our compensation policy is to set wages at the median for non-profit social service agencies in southern California. In our area for example, the Center for Non-Profit Management publishes a 200+ page survey of wages each year. It covers over a hundred positions and discusses benefits and trends as well. It makes it very easy to establish wages and to justify them to both the employees and the board of directors. As the Executive Director I have to defend to the board of directors why I pay so much in salary (from their POV) and then turn around and explain to the staff why they are paid so little (from their POV). For this reason, I need to have a solid philosophy and good data behind that.

Benefits are often added over time, one by one each year depending on overall financial success. Some benefits are easier to offer than others: horse boarding for staff; a 403(b)(7) retirement plan without an employer match; flex time to pick up children at school or on-site childcare; NARHA membership dues; fees for horse clinics. These benefits reinforce a message that the organization is investing in the employee – their success is our success – and that we are thinking long-term and want them to think about us long term.

### Elements of Job Satisfaction:

Understanding what motivates your employees and potential employees allows you to craft a job and package of benefits that meets your needs and theirs. Men & Women, young workers and older workers will have different priorities. Below is a partial list of what people look for in their work. Don't lose an employee because you lose sight of their needs.

- Communication between employees and management
- Recognition
- Relationship with Supervisor
- Job Security
- Compensation
- Satisfaction
- Flexibility
- Training & Continuing Education
- Overall corporate culture
- Autonomy
- Meaningfulness
- Retirement
- Advancement Opportunities