

Main Street Story of the Week, National Main Street Center, March 4, 2013

### **Manager Retention: Ten Tips for Main Street Boards**

I have been working in the Main Street movement for more than a dozen years now in various capacities, and have seen literally hundreds of managers come and go at local programs. Some manager departures were heartbreaking, others swift and bloodless. But manager turnover is real and it costs money. It thwarts downtown progress, and just looks bad if occurs too often.

Local programs have struggled with manager turn over problems for years because the hours are long, the pay is often low, appreciation of the manager can be stingy and board leadership ever changing. Boards can prevent some turn over by addressing root causes.

The following are suggestions for downtown Boards to try to address manager turn over. There are only ten ideas here. I am sure you have others, so please add them in the comments section below.

1. Take manager retention seriously. The revolving door that is so common for managers at Main Street organizations needs to slow down. The Board can make a real difference in the life of a local Main Street manager just by making sure that the manager does have a quality performance evaluation each year. Make sure these meetings include a good give and take about their work, the board culture and hopes for the future. Talk to your state is coordinating program to know what peer organizations are paying, and make an effort to provide regular salary increases.
2. Tell the ED they are doing a great job –often. Main Street managers are trained to show appreciation and give credit to their wonderful volunteers. However, the truth is the manager is the biggest volunteer in the entire program. They are paid to work full or part time and often give ten or more hours to the job beyond their normal workweek. Showing appreciation for that “great can” does spirit goes a long way toward keeping your manager happy.
3. Ask the manager how Board members can be helpful to make his/her job less stressful. Let’s face it, being a downtown Main Street director is fun work, but also highly stressful. Most managers are capable of moving mountains every day. However, asking the manager how Board members can help make the job less difficult or annoying can go a long way. When in doubt, ask! Then try to address the stress.
4. Raise money from all the board for a bonus for a particular job well done. Regarding moving mountains as mentioned above, many Executive Directors work in their hometown because they want the same thing as other residents: a lively and attractive downtown. If your ED has done a particularly great job on an event, a fundraising

project or a difficult negotiation with a funder or opponent, consider taking a collection from fellow board members to show your real appreciation for a job well done. Bonuses given for great work are not often expected and hopefully will surprise and delight your ED with the thoughtful gesture.

5. Take work away from the manager. I do not mean downgrade the job by giving away the “good stuff” to someone else, rather reduce the drudgery of the job. Find someone to take on the membership renewals, entering data in your accounting software, or other largely clerical duties. Ask the manager what jobs they would “outsource” if they could, and find a solution and implement right away.
6. Raise money for a part time events person. Some managers may want to keep the event preparation all to themselves, but others may want a break from this, especially if has extraordinary demands such as setting up a tent every Saturday morning for the farmers market (and taking it down by themselves). This kind of grunt work in the heat of the summer or in the rain might get old quickly. To make the Executive Director’s life a bit easier, the board could raise money to hire a part time person just to manage activities on a regular or episodic basis.
7. If funds are too tight for a raise this year, add more vacation days or holidays and insist the manager take them. Start a new tradition by insisting that all vacation days be used in the year they are accrued. Giving more vacation only helps someone’s work/life balance if they actually take a vacation. Be flexible about how vacation and holiday time is used, but insist they use it.
8. Let the manager take every other Friday off for a few months. A regular three-day weekend, or flextime may be highly desired perk you can offer which costs the organization essentially nothing. While this might not be possible every month because of your event schedule, consider flextime for the shoulder seasons or negotiate the months for this schedule with the manager in advance.
9. Pay all the costs for the manager to attend an additional national or regional conference to help them continue to sharpen their skills. A budget line item that includes funds to attend the annual National Trust Main Street Center conference is a beloved perk for many managers. They get to see their friends, visit a new place and hear the latest in revitalization techniques. The board can offer additional training opportunities for travel out of state, for conferences or other training to keep the manager engaged in this multi-faceted field.
10. Encourage your manager to speak at conferences. If your manager is not shy, (I have never met one), encourage them to tell others about the great work going on in your district, by speaking at a conference session. Suggest that your manager submit speaking proposals for statewide Main Street conference (if they do a call for papers), or

send in a proposal (or two) for the the NTMSC conference. This will help the Executive Director to raise their profile in the Main Street movement and brag about the great work of the local main street effort. Pay all the costs for the Executive Director to attend, so they can toot the horn about your great program.

Please add other interesting perks and ideas that you have for retaining quality managers in local Main Street jobs.