Creating a Culture That Cares in Five Nourishing Steps

By: Heather Iliff

Nonprofit organizations tend to be experts at caring. We care for people at critical points in their lives, we care for the wellbeing of our communities, we care about making changes to public policy, we care about racial equity, we care about our democracy, and we care about making the world a better place. Ironically, all this caring is often directed "out there" into the wider world to advance our missions, and we frequently miss the importance of creating a culture of caring inside our organizations.

Heather Iliff
President and CEO
Maryland Nonprofits

Being immersed in two years and counting of pandemic crisis, as well as our longer national reckoning with racism and a serious workforce crisis, many nonprofit workplaces are currently struggling with a sense of exhaustion and burnout. For

months, I've been seeing at least one new executive director resign each week, and our predominantly women-run nonprofit sector may be facing the most serious transition in leadership in a generation. Exhaustion and burnout are hitting women and people of color the hardest. Pre-existing inequities and the disproportionate impact of [COVID-19 on Black and Latino people and organizations](#) led by people of color have multiplied the stressors and trauma in the face of long hours, grant rejections, constant challenges to make payroll, community members who need more help than your organization can give, and at times, toxic workplace practices that make all of this harmful to our health.

Maryland Nonprofits, a statewide association of nonprofits with 1,400 member organizations, is marking our 30th Anniversary with "This is the Moment to Care", a campaign focused on shifting the workplace culture within nonprofit organizations. We are advocating for increased funding to nonprofits to "[Put People First](#)" and for higher salaries for the [direct care workforce](#). However, money alone will not solve the problem; toxic culture is one of the chief reasons that employees resign.

By embracing a caring work culture for the last two years, our organization has changed enormously for the better, and we are still growing and evolving every day. It's a journey. As leaders, many of us have realized that what we *do* is a thousand times more impactful than what we *say*. What I have now realized is that **how I feel and the energy I bring to each interaction** is more important than what I do *or* say! Once we realize our job is to make the work enjoyable for everyone as much as possible, then people will love what they do, and they will do it well, together.

As we have held listening sessions with nonprofit leaders and staff in other organizations, we have learned the following key ways nonprofits are embracing a culture that cares, enabling them to retain and recruit stellar teams that work together in harmony. The following analysis draws on the presentations from our 30th Anniversary #ThisIsTheMomentToCare event, "Beginning the Conversation around Building Full-Hearted Caring Workplaces," which took place on March 25, 2022 ([view the recording](#) here).

Step 1: Do your Own Work: There is a non-linear or simultaneous process of doing our own individual work, working with our team, our board, our organization, and our mission. Doing our own work looks different for everyone, but at a minimum should be an intentional focus on learning about caring and equitable workplace practices. As a white female leader, it is critical for me to delve deeply into my own

white privilege and assumptions, learning about the history of oppression and the movements led by people of color, people with disabilities, and others who are organizing, writing, and speaking about what needs to change. I need to check myself and my gatekeeping roles, and intentionally center the voices of people with lived experience of oppression. It is an ongoing journey and I make mistakes, have blind spots, and learn new things all the time. We have to be willing to thank people for calling us out, hire people who call us in, and take every mistake as a gift to learn and grow.

Inner work includes journaling, reading, praying, meditating, spending time in nature, caring for your own health, taking breaks, and, if possible, working with a mentor or executive coach. If we cannot find balance as leaders, our team members won't be able to either, and we turn our organization into a burnout factory. We all know what is good for our health, and we can take steps to turn things around for ourselves and our teams. Let's start thinking about our own health and our organizational health as connected.

Step 2: Identify and End Toxic Behaviors: Organizations that are great places to work tend to be inclusive, respectful, ethical, collaborative, and caring. [Toxic organizations](#) vary in degree, and tend to be non-inclusive, disrespectful, unethical, cut-throat, undermining, and to have abusive bosses. Most leaders do not realize the ways that they are disrespectful to their teams, but people feel it. Anonymous culture surveys and 360 assessments can surface damaging situations that are occurring in your organization. Simply talking to people, getting to know them, and exhibiting genuine care will do the same. Find the infinite ways to learn about what people in your organization *think*, *feel*, and *do* that are healthy, and build on that.

Step 3: Address Patterns of White Dominant Culture: If your organization already feels respectful and caring, you may be ready to go deeper into identifying practices that are rooted in white-dominant, American business management culture that can be undermining your staff and organization. Leadership literature is overwhelmingly centered on white male leadership styles, which are not always well suited to inclusive ways of creating, knowing, doing, and caring. This excellent [resource on white dominant culture](#) from "Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change," by the late Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun of ChangeWork, calls out things that are present in nearly every organization, such as perfectionism, sense of urgency, power hoarding, and fear of conflict. Many of these practices are invisible, taken for granted, subconscious, and are reproduced in most workplaces. One step

you can take is to surface assumptions you are making about the best way to work, or what success looks like. Where did that assumption come from? Could another way work as well or better? Engage the entire team and follow up with plenty of "yes, let's take next steps" on ideas and suggestions, especially those coming from staff of color, front-line, and junior staff members.

Step 4: Have a New Approach to Time: When we engage people in the question, "what are the workplace practices that are uncaring?," a huge majority of the comments are about TIME, and the lack of ability to meet the time demands of a typical 40+ hour workweek. Trading time for labor has been baked into our culture and our federal and state laws, with the standard being an 8-hour workday and a 40-hour workweek. Research is now showing that 32 hours a week works better for productivity and for society. Belgium is going to a 32-hour work week and there is a bill in Congress to move to a 32-hour standard in the U.S.

White male dominant leadership culture (stereotypically relying on a stay-at-home wife mental model, even if that's not the reality for most households) lionizes the 50- 60- or even 70-hour workweek. These mental and organizational models have seeped deeply into all of us and are reproduced in nonprofit organizations. They are not working for the people who have commuting challenges, families, health concerns of their own, and other realities that make this overwork culture harmful to our health and wellbeing. Managers tend to over-focus on being ON TIME – "three strikes, you're out." To have a caring workplace, we need to acknowledge that it is a privilege to be able to be on time every day, because it is easier for people who have cars, people who are not caregivers, people who don't have to put kids on a bus or drop them at daycare at a specific time, people who do not have chronic health conditions, and other challenges that those who haven't experienced them may not be aware of.

At Maryland Nonprofits, we are primarily remote since the pandemic, and we allow people flexibility in their day and in their hours. We have closed down the office for a full week in August and added paid leave, as well as taking other steps to support employees that I described in my January 2022 blog post, "[Inaugurating a Year of Grace](#)."

Step 5: Trust your team, listen and let it bloom! Five years ago, I couldn't have dreamed how far we have come together as a team today. We've seen major successes in advocacy advancing our $1 billion ["Putting People First" agenda](#) that

has been included in the State budget, expanding our services for small and people of color-led organizations; 16 percent growth in membership; flourishing new strategic partnerships, including with Maryland Latinos Unidos, a new organization formed as a program of Maryland Nonprofits in 2020; and we're on track to launch a new Nonprofit Business Accelerator program to provide back-office and Standards for Excellence support for nonprofits. There is so much to celebrate!

At Maryland Nonprofits, thanks to creating our caring culture, including more leave and flexibility for staff, success is present for us every day as a board/staff team. We've never been more harmonious or more productive as we hold true to our vision of a well-resourced nonprofit sector with people who are effective agents of change for equity, creativity, sustainability, and community wellbeing.

Whatever your nonprofit's vision, mission, or size, you can create a workplace culture that cares. Everyone can do this. The first step is not easy, but it's simple – we open our hearts, we do our own work, and all else will follow.

More information: This is the Moment to Care Campaign

Our Series on Creative Approaches to the Nonprofit Workforce Shortage Crisis

This article is part of a series describing creative, practical approaches to the workforce shortage crisis that can elevate equity, address burnout and stress, and discover, nurture, and develop talent in nontraditional ways.

One of our five core values at the National Council of Nonprofits is "Honoring the Nonprofit Workforce," which reflects our deeply held belief that "Nonprofits and their employees should have the respect and the resources needed to get their work done."

That core value shapes our work creating and curating information to assist frontline nonprofits with their operations and capacity-building. It also drives much of our advocacy work promoting public policy solutions at the federal, state, and local levels to get more funds to nonprofits stretched by the combination of growing needs, decreasing revenue, increasing costs, and rising salaries.