



# **Putting People First:**

## ***Improving Staff and Volunteer Happiness to Enhance Organizational Performance***

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### **Content Leaders:**

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**Scott & Jodie’s 9 Cultural Traits of Positive Cultures**

1. Leaders in positive cultures act with authenticity & earn trust.
2. Positive cultures don’t promote negativity.
3. Positive cultures advocate balance.
4. Positive cultures promote personal & professional growth.
5. Positive cultures understand the intrinsic motivations of their staff and volunteers.
6. Life is hard enough. Positive cultures allow for flexibility for both staff and volunteers.
7. Positive cultures encourage both formal and informal interaction.
8. Positive cultures cultivate creativity and allow for fun.
9. Positive cultures are genuinely appreciative of the contributions of staff and volunteers.

**What NOT to Do:**

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**Action Items**

1. **Conduct pointed and anonymous staff/volunteer happiness surveys.** At ACerS, the annual staff survey asks staff how much they agree or disagree with statements like: “I understand how the role I play contributes to the Society's mission,” “I am treated fairly and with respect,” “There is an environment of trust and openness at ACerS,” “Generally, people enjoy working here,” “I work with a great team of people,” and “Information about the organization is freely shared.” **COST: FREE**



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- 2. Ensure that volunteer assignments are truly meaningful and explain why if there's any doubt.** Begin each year with a written report of what the volunteer committee or group intends to accomplish that year and then have the volunteers grade themselves on how well they did. **COST: FREE**
- 3. Make sure your culture sincerely embraces volunteer contributions.** Have an honest discussion with your staff liaisons about whether your volunteers at all levels are able to make a significant contribution to the organization or if you are just keeping them busy or giving them reports. Better yet, do a survey and ask the volunteers if they feel valued. **COST: FREE**
- 4. Make servant leadership and temperament a requirement for leadership positions (don't elevate jerks).** Talk to your leadership about the importance of qualities like listening, openness to new ideas, consensus building, collaboration, and fairness are for leadership. Create volunteer leader job descriptions that include these traits. Make them part of the criteria for service, particularly for chairs. **COST: FREE**
- 5. Treat persistent negativity by a staff member as a behavior problem.** This does not mean that you should ignore serious concerns or complaints by staff or create a culture in which people are afraid to raise any negative issues. But some people seem to never have a nice word to say about their colleagues, others' work, or the organization. These people can have serious effects on the productivity and morale of other staff. Talk to these employees about their effects on the rest of the staff and, if they are unable to change, help them to transition to a place where they might be happier. **COST: FREE**
- 6. Strongly encourage staff to take their vacation time and leave at a decent hour. Model this behavior yourself.** While there are times when staff may have to work longer hours, expecting staff to routinely work extended hours neither helps productivity nor morale. Employees who take vacation time come back recharged and fresh. Staff who have time to take care of non-work obligations will be more focused and on-task when they are in the office. **COST: FREE**
- 7. Offer volunteer assignments that do not require year long commitments.** Some volunteers are able to serve on a committee for a year or more and are able to fund the travel and other expenses required to participate. But others who might like to become involve may not be able to give that kind of commitment or have the resources, particularly younger professionals. Offer ways to engage in the association that do not require significant time or financial commitments and recognize these commitments as legitimate volunteer experiences. These opportunities might include things like serving as a blogger or online forum moderator, participating in a one-day brainstorming session, or volunteering to help at a meeting. **COST: FREE**
- 8. Create a simple personal-professional-organizational learning program for staff using local resources.** While many organizations pay for certain staff members' professional memberships and meeting attendance, many mid-level and administrative staff are not able to or choose not to take advantage of these offerings. At ACerS, we have created a learning plan that is



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open to everyone. Staff members can take advantage of a number of professional development and personal development opportunities throughout the year. Topics include things like managing your personal money in difficult times, new ways to use social media to benefit members, organizational finances for non-financial professionals, getting the most out of Windows, and getting started on a fitness program. Virtually all of the speakers at these programs have donated their time, although we do provide lunch for staff and give a small gift to the speakers. **COST: MINIMAL**

- 9. Build explicit learning experiences into every committee meeting.** Use experienced volunteers or staff to teach skills like how to run an effective meeting, parliamentary procedure, facilitation, etc. Have one committee member at each meeting give a 10-15 minute presentation on a topic of professional interest for which they have particular expertise. Have the chair ask each committee member to write down (or bring with them) what they think are the two greatest challenges facing their industry/profession and the two biggest opportunities. Go around the table and share. **COST: FREE**
- 10. Help staff understand how members contribute to society by sending staff out for member visits.** Arrange staff field trips to the workplaces of members within driving distance so that they can gain a better appreciation of what members do. At ACerS, every society staff member is required to make at least one visit per year and members appreciate it as much as the staff does. **COST: MINIMAL**
- 11. Take time to know volunteers well enough/learn what makes volunteering meaningful for them.** Coach staff liaisons and chairs to have conversations with volunteers about why they volunteer, or develop a form and ask the volunteer to tell you what motivates them. Give volunteers assignments that align with their true strengths and desires. **COST: FREE**
- 12. Eliminate or moderate policies that deter flexibility – dress codes, fixed work hours, no personal use of computers, etc.** Many staff policies were implemented to accomplish a specific goal at the time they were implemented. Others were created because it is just the way things are done. The reality is that many of these rules are now just rules without a real purpose. Will staff really be less productive if they wear neat jeans to the office every day? Does having core hours really matter for all staff? Do we really expect staff to never use their computers for personal matters? Eliminate the rules that decrease flexibility while serving a minimal positive purpose. **COST: FREE**
- 13. Create policies that promote flexibility – telecommuting, flex time, leave banks, etc.** Staff have lives that extend beyond the office. Policies like flex-time, leave banks, and telecommuting are highly valued by staff and cost little if anything for the organization. **COST: MINIMAL**
- 14. Encourage casual interaction among staff.** Sit down and talk to your staff where they work about what's going on and don't react negatively or hover when staff members are chatting with each other. **COST: FREE**



- 15. Plan regular team meetings with prepared agendas (so you aren't wasting people's time). Foster discussions instead of monologues.** This one seems simple: meet! Meet with your senior team, meet with the whole team, hold department meetings, meet with your direct reports. Face-to-face meetings improve communication and most importantly, allow for two-way communication. If you find that meetings tend to be more a series of monologues than discussions, write out discussion questions in advance and indentify discussions clearly on the agenda. In larger groups, break people into small groups to make participation easier. **COST: FREE**
- 16. With volunteers, don't assume everyone knows each other or doesn't know each other at meetings.** Always ask all participants to introduce themselves for the first couple of meetings or if there are new members. Start conversations with groups of members at coffee breaks. Act like the host at a party. **COST: FREE**
- 17. Have fun, even in hard times.** At ACerS, we do one fun outside activity together each quarter like taking the staff for mini golf, having a tailgate party in the parking lot (go Bucks!), etc. We also do any number of smaller activities all the time, including birthday celebrations, potluck lunches, a Biggest Loser competition, an American Idol competition, etc. Scott (the executive director) also hosts a department dinner at his home each quarter. **COST: MINIMAL** (Less than \$2000 per year for a staff of 35, not including a holiday party and the dinners at Scott's house).
- 18. Get people's creative juices flowing – weekly design meetings, idea sessions, etc.** Teach staff creativity and facilitation techniques. Hold brainstorming meetings every other week on different topics design to make your organization better. Alternate with an "implementation meeting" to discuss how to make the best idea of the previous week a reality. **COST: FREE**
- 19. For volunteers, build a "strategy discussion" into every meeting.** Make this an explicit part of the agenda and, whenever possible, put it first. Choose a specific discussion question for the agenda that is designed to stimulate discussion. For example: "If we could only do three things, what would they be?" "What is the smallest action we could take that would have the biggest effect regarding \_\_\_\_?" "How do our members define value?" Work toward at least 50 percent discussion time at meetings. **COST: FREE**
- 20. Recognize, reward, and thank your team for their hard work and good performance.** Write thank you notes/cards, accept staff nominations for employee of the month and award certificates at your monthly staff meeting. Treat star performers or teams to occasional "thank you" lunches out. **COST: MINIMAL**
- 21. Create a written, top-to-bottom volunteer recognition plan that recognizes volunteer performance at all levels.** **COST: FREE-EXPENSIVE**
- 22. Handwrite thank you notes to key volunteers every year.** **COST: FREE**