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Analyzing and Managing Staff Turnover in Aquatic Facilities

Leland Yarger

Does it seem like you are constantly searching for new aquatic personnel such as lifeguards, instructors, or even a director for your facility? Does it appear as if your organization is merely a temporary career stepping stone for aquatic staff? This article might help you determine why you have staffing problems, as well as offering some solutions.

Key Words: aquatic facility management, aquatic human resources, fiscal responsibility, aquatic staff loss

Why do you have to seek out new leadership for your aquatic facility and programs so often? Some possible questions that can lead to reasons that might be causing turnover include

- Do you have a seasonal or year-round facility?
- Is your staff budget small compared with similar organizations, resulting in lower salaries and hourly wages?
- Do your staff positions include health insurance and other benefits?
- How many hours per week are your staff guaranteed, and are their hours scheduled at similar times of the day so that they can hold more than one job?
- Can the aquatic staff including the director make a living wage working for you without working additional jobs?

Let's explore each of these questions in more depth. The following discussion may provide you with some insight and possible solutions to a high turnover rate at your aquatic facility.

Seasonal Versus Year-Round Facilities

Organizations with operations running only part of the year (e.g., summers only) typically have leadership problems from year to year because of the part-time and seasonal nature of the jobs, which requires potential staff to seek and hold other employment outside the normal summer season. Although some seasonal facilities are fortunate to employ staff (e.g., local school teachers) continually over a number

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of years, other facilities face an annual turnover in staff as a result of changing personal situations, suboptimal past working positions, noncompetitive pay, or lack of loyalty to the facility.

First and most important, it is critical to know what questions to ask when interviewing candidates applying for aquatic staff positions, especially the leadership positions. Most seasonal organizations do not have in-house aquatic professionals unless a local teacher or coach is available summertime to work and lead the facility. One solution to reduce your chances of hiring less qualified employees and help you understand your facility's weak points is to hire an aquatic consultant who specializes in aquatic facility operations. A qualified aquatic consultant should conduct a comprehensive facility inspection and evaluation culminating in a written report. You also should contract with an aquatic consultant to write a list of questions that you can use when interviewing candidates for potential leadership and other staff positions. Aquatic consultants can be found through aquatic trade publications, local aquatic vendors, and online Web searches. Anyone contracting with an aquatic consultant should contact references and previous organizations that hired the consultant to verify that his or her reputation is solid. As you plan to hire a consultant, verify a range of consulting fees so that you can budget for this service. Consulting fees vary widely depending on the individual or group and the services required. Typically the quality of the consultation will be directly proportionate to its cost.

The true test of the quality of potential aquatic staff employees is whether they know or do not know the various tasks involved in the job. A candidate's aquatic certifications might get him or her an interview, but the real test is how well the individual is able to answer common questions about aquatic facilities. Here are a few possible interview questions:

- We use calcium hypochlorite (cal hypo) in our pool. What can you tell me about and what is your experience with cal hypo? Can you tell me some specific safety issues when dealing with cal hypo and how have you dealt with them in the past?
- What aquatic facilities have you managed or worked at before, and what was their primary purpose? What facilities in this state and other states? May we contact these facilities for references? Who should we speak to?
- In your previous aquatic work experiences, what was a specific example of a challenging issue that you had to deal with? How did you resolve the issue?
- What does our state law say about supervision of the pool, specifically about the requirements for lifeguards?
- Describe how lifeguards should present themselves while on duty. What are examples of how lifeguards have not complied with these requirements, and how did you deal with their noncompliance?
- Suppose you encounter an irate parent at the entrance because the pool facility did not open on time. How do you handle this specific situation? How do you remedy the problem of not opening on time?

You must have a list of possible answers and a rationale available so you can evaluate whether the candidate knows the answers or not. If they know the answer,

how well did they answer? It is strongly recommended that you create an evaluation rubric for each question that rates specific answers from weak to strong. An example rubric for the second question is proposed as follows:

- *Unacceptable response:* I have no experience.
- *Weak response:* I just got my lifeguard certification and I want a job where I can get a tan.
- *Acceptable response:* I've been a lifeguard and head guard for 3 seasons and shift supervisor for 2 years managing 50 lifeguards, and I'm currently attending college.
- *Strong response:* I've been an aquatic director for xyz facility for 3 years and hold current certifications including lifeguard training, lifeguard instructor, water safety instructor, and pool operations, and I regularly teach swimming and lifeguarding.
- *Strongest response:* I've had a work history in aquatics since becoming a lifeguard at age 16. I have managed aquatic facilities for 5+ years, and I attend and teach aquatic certification courses. I hold current certifications including lifeguard training, lifeguard instructor, water safety instructor, and pool operations. I also have a bachelor's degree from xyz university.

Similar rubrics should be created for each proposed question. Your aquatic consultant could help you frame various responses along with a continuum from weak to strong.

Limited Budget?

Is your staff budget small compared with similar organizations, resulting in lower salaries and hourly wages, as well as no benefits? In order to understand how your facility budget and pay scales stack up against other organizations and facilities in your area, you need to talk with other aquatic leaders in your immediate region about staff size, wage range, and leadership benefits that they offer. Once you have some concrete information from your competitors, analyze the findings and estimate where your organization falls along continua of high, middle, or low in terms of wages, staff size, and requirements. This information will provide you with ammunition to call for changes, if needed, from your supervisor or advisory board.

If the base wage for your leadership position has little if any flexibility, you will need to consider other ways to enhance the attractiveness of the position. Some possible areas where funds may be redirected based on performance and productivity incentives might include the following.

Performance

- Reduced facility expenses by streamlining the overall work process. A large part of being able to streamline work comes from hiring an individual who actually understands the job well and can make changes without sacrificing quality. A well-qualified individual makes fewer mistakes and takes less time to complete the job properly.

- Reduced expenses through effective chemical usage. A staff member who understands water treatment will use fewer chemicals with better water quality as a result; this will reduce facility chemical costs. If a well-qualified individual does not hold a pool operator credential, it probably will be cost-effective to support this person's completion of such training. Training is widely available through the National Swimming Pool Foundation, National Recreation and Parks Association, and YMCA of the USA.

Productivity

- Increased revenue over the projected baseline through sales. Revenue can be enhanced by a leader who has interpersonal skills, as well as some basic knowledge of marketing, and who can effectively market your facility to the appropriate clientele. This takes time and cannot be done in a few weeks immediately before the season but should occur over a period of several months to a year.
- Increased revenue as a result of fewer closures and mechanical failures. Hiring a qualified person with experience and credentials as a pool operator is one strategy for achieving this result. Another is to make sure that sufficient funds are allocated for preventive maintenance, repair, and regular upgrading of facilities and equipment.
- Reduction in problems that require administrative attention. A mature, experienced individual will be able to handle immediate problems and can proactively address concerns with the administration or board before they become crises.

Incentive programs, such as gain sharing, that tie performance and productivity improvements to pay have become much more commonplace in the workplace. Pay-for-performance incentive programs have seen the number of employees double from 1990 to 1995 (Markowich, 1994). If your organization cannot afford a highly competitive base salary, profit sharing or performance-based compensation might be another mechanism that allows you make up the salary shortfall.

Performance-Incentive Examples

- Through a detailed evaluation of aquatics staff time management, overall wage expenses can be reduced. For example, you might need to examine your preopening and opening procedures. If you discover that time is wasted simply because the facility setup and cleaning schedules are not coordinated, you can alter those protocols without sacrificing quality or safety. Another solution might be to invest in an automatic pool-vacuum system rather than relying on more time-intensive manual vacuuming. With an automatic vacuum system, staff can attend to other areas that cannot be automated (such as cleaning decks or locker rooms) while the vacuum is operating automatically. The study of time management requires having someone with the experience to do the analysis, such as an aquatic consultant, who can generate a realistic and accurate report.

- When the pool is superchlorinated, does your staff actually calculate the proper amount of chemical required without using more than necessary? Should this procedure be conducted every Tuesday or only when the combined chlorine residuals reach a critical point? Attention to this single detail can result in a large reduction in operating costs! If you or your staff do not know the answer, it is critical that you consult a pool operator who knows and has experience. As suggested earlier under the staffing section, sending staff (including leadership and operators) to a National Swimming Pool Foundation's certified pool operator (CPO), National Recreation and Parks Association's aquatic facility operator (AFO), or the YMCA's pool operator on location (POOL) course would be money well spent.
- What if your facility's pool is outdoors? Does the local health department's bathing code allow you to use a chemical stabilizer? Do you use stabilizer in your outdoor facilities? If you do not understand the use of stabilizer, this is another critical knowledge and skill your aquatic leaders and pool operators need to gain from a pool operator's course. Chemical consumption can be greatly reduced through stabilizer use at outdoor facilities. There are specific safety issues concerning patrons and equipment to consider when using stabilizer, so consult a pool operator or other qualified professional before using it.

Productivity-Incentive Examples

- If you have averaged 500 season passes over the past 5 years, you might tie a salary bonus percentage to additional-percentage season-pass sales. This technique can be used for all staff, not just your manager or aquatic director. If you make it available for all staff, you will need a mechanism to identify which staff members are responsible for which new season-pass purchases.
- Increasing the numbers and types of instructional- and other swim-program registrations generates new revenue and is a possible area to provide a profit-sharing incentive for your staff. You can also tie the development of new programs and professional development to lead these programs to salary bonuses.
- Fewer mechanical failures because of proactive practices by your staff leadership that lead to improved maintenance practices and attention to detail is another means by which you can pass along cost savings to the staff and redistribute a percentage of savings to wages.
- Reducing foreseeable emergencies that pull administrators away from their normal routines and duties can be another means of generating cost savings, both in efficiency and in overall staffing costs. An analysis of whether such events are truly emergencies or simply brought to you because your staff does not have the necessary authority to make decisions can be an important source of cost savings. Such an analysis, done by an objective and experienced person, can identify how much administrative time is wasted because the decision-making power is not in the hands of the appropriate individuals. One rule of thumb for delegating authority should be, Decisions and actions should be

performed by the lowest level person who is capable of making that decision and delivering the service. Obviously, along with the delegation of authority to make decisions should go the appropriate training, as well as accountability.

When you hire and retain competent staff with the necessary training, experience, and authority, all is well. Your leadership staff should understand that failure to perform also might warrant reduction or loss of performance incentives in the current year or, in dire circumstances, even a decline in base wages in the following fiscal year if the averages are not retained or exceeded.

According to Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, authors of the behavioral-sciences text *Management of Organizational Behavior* (2001), the opportunity to have additional income resulting from outstanding performance will be attractive to about 50% of the workforce.

Assessment

As with each of these techniques your organization must have assessment tools to measure the outcomes. A very insightful tool that you can apply immediately is the exit interview. If staff members are leaving simply ask these questions:

- Why are you leaving?
- What did you like about working here?
- What did you dislike about your job? The facilities? Other staff? etc.
- How would you fix these problems if you were in charge?

You will often be surprised how candid former employees are. After all, they have nothing to lose—they are leaving.

When you are faced with continual turnover in staff and lack of progress in enhancing revenue, introducing performance and productivity incentives is one solution to consider. They are not without risk, but the benefits and gains might be worth it if you have employed the right individuals and are willing to analyze your situation and make the appropriate changes.

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