

Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

There are reasons why Red Cross is praised

A core value of any nonprofit organization must be quality service to clients and donors. Providing high quality service is a sign of an organization's commitment to its mission. Yet why do so many people think quality service is the exception instead of the rule?

One local organization has been recognized for its client satisfaction. For the second consecutive year, the San Luis Obispo County Chapter of the American Red Cross has received the Client Satisfaction Award for the American Red Cross' Pacific Region. This award is presented annually to the chapter that scores the highest on anonymous surveys of randomly selected participants after every program, class, or service provided by a chapter.

In talking with Grace McIntosh, executive director of the SLO County Chapter, it becomes clear how the local group achieves such high marks. The Red Cross actively seeks out feedback. "If we don't solicit feedback," McIntosh said, "then we're missing out on potential growth areas and opportunities to change. We need to adapt to the changing needs of our clients."

McIntosh added, "In some areas we know (clients') expectations. In other areas, like disaster response, people don't know what they want. People report surprise at how attentive our staff and volunteers are."

Where does this commitment to good client service begin? At the SLO County Red Cross, it starts with the board of directors, which listens to client feedback, McIntosh said. Clients are invited to make presentations to the board about programs and services.

The downside to soliciting feedback, analyzing it, and acting on it is that it can be expensive. Like every other organization, the SLO County Red Cross struggles with this. "We need to find ways to fund some of these costs up front, trusting in our plans and activities to generate revenue and gifts," McIntosh observed.

If a nonprofit organization wants to meet and exceed client expectations, here are a few lessons learned from the SLO County Red Cross. First, the organization must have a commitment to quality client service. This commitment must be made by the board of directors, and the core value must be nurtured throughout the organization.

Second, because the collection of feedback and adjusting programs as a result of the feedback requires staff time and budget allocation, the cost of providing quality service must be included in the organization's annual budget as well as its strategic plan.

Third, client expectations can only be learned by listening to the clients. Actively soliciting feedback, then acting on the results, will help the organization adapt to changing client needs.

Last, everyone in the organization must be open to change, be trained in other functions in order to create organizational flexibility, and must provide quality service to every client. Continually improving quality service will enable an organization to adapt to changing community needs. And people will remember when they are treated well. Quality customer service would be a good brand to have.

Barry VanderKelen is executive director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other Tuesday in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.