

A COMPREHENSIVE CASE STUDY

Rethinking Advancement: Supporting Employee Growth in a Small Nonprofit

Client Demographics

Nonprofit HR Practice Area: People & Organizational Strategy

Location: Canton, Michigan

Sector: Nonprofit

Mission Type: Diverse Abilities

Staff Size: 10-15 employees

Annual Budget: >\$1 million

Type of Engagement: Advisory

Scenario

A Michigan-based nonprofit sought strategic guidance in evaluating an employee's request for promotion from a Manager to an Assistant Director role — one that did not formally exist within the organization's structure. Nonprofit HR's People & Organizational Strategy team was engaged to support the Executive Director in assessing viable pathways for addressing the request while maintaining organizational integrity and equity in career progression.

Engagement Duration

Following the initial consultation with the Executive Director, our team provided a tailored recommendation within approximately 48 hours of the initial request, ensuring a timely and informed resolution.

Engagement Details

To gain deeper insight into the employee's promotion request, our team recommended a structured conversation to uncover the underlying motivations — whether concerns regarding compensation, role responsibilities or career progression. This approach would enable the Executive Director to address the employee's core needs effectively. The firm's People & Organizational Strategy team equipped the Executive Director with tailored talking points, anticipated responses based on potential employee feedback, and a detailed analysis of the competencies, experience and educational qualifications required for the requested Assistant Director role in comparison to the employee's current position.

Considerations

The request posed three primary challenges:

- 1 The Assistant Director position did not exist within the organization's current structure.
- 2 As a small nonprofit with 10–15 employees, the organization lacked both the financial capacity and operational necessity to establish the role.
- 3 The Assistant Director role would require a more specialized skill set.

Solutions

During the conversation, the Executive Director discovered that the employee was primarily seeking opportunities for professional growth rather than a change in compensation or job function. Having been in the role for several years, the employee remained engaged with their responsibilities but desired a clear path for advancement within the organization.

Thanks to the strategic preparation provided by our team, the Executive Director was equipped to facilitate a constructive discussion on career development and internal progression. The conversation ultimately resulted in a mutually agreeable resolution – implementing a title change that acknowledged the employee's growth while maintaining alignment with the organization's structure and resources.

More broadly, this situation highlighted the importance of transparency around how and when employees are recognized and rewarded, particularly in a small organization with limited opportunities for upward mobility. The Executive Director had already planned to assess and refine the organization's performance review process and compensation philosophy in 2025, identifying opportunities to enhance equity and consistency. This conversation served as a catalyst for a deeper exploration of the organization's approach to compensation, including considerations for merit increases, cost-of-living adjustments, and other forms of financial and non-financial recognition.

To support these efforts, our team provided guidance on compensation frameworks, bonus structures suited to organizations of their size, and strategies for ensuring alignment with their mission and workplace culture. Our team continued to collaborate on the development of a staff recognition program that reinforced the organization's commitment to valuing and retaining top talent.