A Staff of One: On the special trials and joys of leading a small organization

By Amy Barnhart, former Executive Director, Hispanic League of Winston-Salem, North Carolina
President/Outfitters4, Inc.

The Hispanic League was begun in 1992 when a group of community leaders identified a need for a multi-cultural space or event that would serve as a way to promote inclusion and acceptance of the Hispanic/Latino community. Organizers decided that a festival would be the best way to provide a forum for interaction and to showcase Hispanic/Latino culture. As is often the case for organizers, they found that in order to secure donations from businesses, they would need to put structures in place and file for 501(c)(3) status. This was done and the Hispanic League was born. ¡Fiesta! quickly became one of the most popular and well-attended festivals in the city, generating enough funding to not only support itself but to provide services to the Hispanic/Latino community. The Hispanic League identified education and access to resources as its primary areas of focus, and until 2009, the organization was managed by its Board of Directors. It hired its first part time executive director in 2009. I was hired to fill this position when the director left later that year. I quickly realized that there was more work than one person with a part time schedule could ever manage, so I wrote a grant that allowed me to transition to a full time employee.

With its seventeen year history of all-volunteer management, inevitably, there were transition struggles. Some Board members immediately assumed that with a paid staffer that their full participation was no longer needed, while others thought they would continue at the previous level of participation. It's fair to say that the change was very hard for everyone involved and much of the first year was spent sorting out processes and figuring out who would manage what. Learning to share project management was challenging for everyone. After the transition year, things settled down and we ended up with about fifteen very active and hands-on Board members.

When you manage an all-volunteer organization, the biggest challenge is having to serve so many functions that it's very difficult to do any of them well - even the things you are "good at". The areas where you excel – perhaps the very strengths you were hired for - tend to get little attention because a disproportional amount of your time is spent on things you're not good at. In my case, it was the administrative tasks, like bookkeeping. While I tend to be highly organized and fairly good with numbers, it was often incredibly frustrating and time-consuming to spend hours and hours trying to make sense of the books when I knew there were higher value activities I could (and should) be spending time on, such as meeting with potential funders. I was also responsible for authoring and translating materials, writing grants, planning events, developing partnerships, marketing, fundraising and programming. It was overwhelming, to say the least. And, because I had the *capability* and willingness but not necessarily true *expertise* in these areas, I ended up having to do it all. If you're in this position now, you know exactly what I'm talking about!

Nonprofit organizations have a legitimate mandate to be frugal, but there comes a time when penny-pinching is counter-productive. Board members can pontificate endlessly about enhanced time management, but at the end of the day, there are only so many hours one person can reasonably put in and this limits what the organization can achieve. Volunteers can help, but it takes time to set up a meaningful volunteer program and it takes time to manage volunteers. When you are a staff of one, it's virtually impossible to carve out the time to figure this one out. It can be a great solution long term, but in the short term, it takes time that you simply don't have. Outsourcing or making a Board member responsible for some of these activities is the only thing that makes sense. But in order to secure buy-in from your Board, you have to be crystal clear with them about how your time is spent and what the priorities are. This may mean taking them through the exercise of sharing a list

and asking which of the items on it you should *not* work on if they ask you to take on something new. The ongoing challenge will always be making sure you're working on the things you're really supposed to work on. Ask yourself, always, "Is this the highest and best use of my time?" And if it isn't, note it and communicate this back to your board so expectations are clear.

My advice to anyone working as a sole staff member would be these seven things:

1. Ask your Board for help before you start feeling like you're drowning. My worst habit was not asking for help until it was already overwhelming. Most of us like to feel competent and we wouldn't be working for a nonprofit if we weren't passionate, dedicated and willing to give - and keep giving. But this isn't sustainable and ultimately does not serve the organization or its constituents well either. So request and require Board participation: take them with you to meet with funders, set up a development committee and have them write the letters, and have Board members recruit volunteers. The key to success here is having them "own" their share of the work. If they are responsible for it, make sure that the committee presents the work to the rest of the Board and make it *their* job to recruit additional Board support as needed. And, in order to make this stick, you must have a close relationship with the Chair. Make the time to lunch with her/him at least once a month. This gives both of you time to discuss things informally so you can secure their support and best of all, so there are no surprises in meetings.

2. Set limits. Initially, I answered calls and emails 24/7. This established an unfortunate precedent with my Board and led to a great deal of frustration for me. Setting this boundary is essential to your sanity and it meets the "reasonableness" test.

3. Maintain a to-do list. This will be a constant, but learn to filter it and always ask whether it's something that you alone can handle or whether it's something a Board member could take on.

4. Make technology your friend. This can be tough as it will take time, but it's essential. Seek out free and discounted resources for nonprofits and utilize them. Expect and plan time for the learning curve but know that the payback will be tremendous once you master it. Changing systems will be hard - not only in terms of what you must learn but also in terms of the Board. Share and communicate these challenges. If you anticipate them, they'll be easier to manage once you begin implementation.

5. Nurture the relationship with your Chair. I said it before and it warrants repetition. This relationship is vital to your success and happiness. You have to know the people you'll be working with and this person is key. Communicate and be clear about expectations, needs and constraints.

6. Get help with fundraising. No one person can do it all and this is an area where the Board must help. Make it clear from the outset that everyone has a role in ensuring the financial wellbeing of the organization and ensure your Chair backs you up. If they won't, then this is a no-win situation for you!

7. Ask for help in other areas. Take a time-out to assess needs, review with your Chair and secure Board support. This may mean outsourcing services such as payroll, bookkeeping or marketing or enlisting a Board member to handle some functions.

There comes a time when having a staff of one is no longer sustainable. At this point, the Executive Director and Board must come to terms with the challenge of justifying the expense of hiring additional staff while knowing that the need on the programming side continues to grow. Spending on overhead never makes donors or Board members happy, yet there is a point at which failing to spend inhibits growth and prevents an organization from doing more. It will always be a balancing act, but the important thing is to accurately convey the opportunity

cost of failing to hire. This means sharing information with your constituents in the form of anecdotes, data, visuals and infographics. If they come from the business world, they will understand words like “payback scenario”, “project justification”, “opportunity cost” or “competitive arena”. Don’t be afraid to use these words when you speak with them or make a presentation.

If you will be a staff of one for the foreseeable future, I recommend that you first identify your core skills and strengths and list how they may best be used to help your organization. Share this first with your Chair, then with the rest of your Board, and use this to establish quarterly priorities and to recruit support for the areas you are weak in. This may mean getting the Board to fund outsourced support (books, marketing or whatever) or volunteering themselves (creating and managing a volunteer program).

If you are not good and separating your work and personal lives, focus on learning how to set limits. Begin by limiting the times when you respond to emails or calls. Work hard to establish happy and strong relationships with all Board members, especially your Chair. Be cordial, meet them for coffee, and talk about other things you both care about. Don’t be afraid to network, introduce them to others and be sure to invite them to other functions and events where you also volunteer, lead or manage. This will help them see how highly you are valued to others and that special magic you bring to your own organization. Never underestimate the power of unsolicited endorsement from outside community leaders!

My personal Waterloo was always that I hated to ask for help. Don’t let this be your failure too. Ask for help when you legitimately need it, but make sure you’re not crying wolf and that you ask Board members for support with meaningful work- not just the trivial things no one enjoys. If you only ask for help with tasks and not initiatives, they will lose interest and leave.

Lastly, let your Board know who you really are. You bring something special to your organization- it’s why they hired you. Be authentic and honest. If they really know you, they’ll accept a degree of discomfort in meetings when tough choices have to be made and most importantly, they will learn to trust you and your judgment. When you have the Board’s trust, you will experience greater empowerment and satisfaction. At the end of the day, that’s what we all work towards. I wish you all the best. If you’d like to discuss a personal challenge, feel free to email me.

Amy Barnhart
President/Outfitters4, Inc.
888.929.9499 x102
amy@outfitters4.com