

What Would You do?

How to Handle the Sticky Stuff



The following scenarios are intended to demonstrate types of situations that may arise in the shelter setting. Each scenario is followed by questions to be considered as part of self reflection to assess your learning need for different approaches to more effectively fulfil your Executive Director role.

SECTION 1: ETHICS

1. The situation:

Geraldine has designed a website for your shelter to provide stakeholders and the public with information that will be useful to improve the quality of their lives, regardless of whether they are clients or not. As webmaster, she routinely surfs the Internet for interesting published articles about the issues of concern to the work you do, and publishes excerpts from them to the website so that everyone can view them. There is no charge to anyone for viewing these articles, and Geraldine considers this to be a valuable public service. This has been going on for the past several years until it is brought to your attention by a Board Member.

What Would You do? *Questions to consider:*

- Is Geraldine acting unethically by posting these articles?
- Is Geraldine violating the law by posting these articles?
- What should the policy of the organization be with respect to posting published articles such as these?

2. The situation:

You are the executive director of a shelter. A generous donor has provided a \$50,000 donation to allow the shelter to purchase new furniture, appliances, and décor but only for that purpose. The shelter is in the middle of a painful, but necessary process of shutting down a women's outreach program because of a lack of funds. Knowing that the current furniture, appliances, and décor are adequate, and it would take a year of successful fund raising plus grant writing to re-establish the program, and knowing many women would be severely affected by the loss of this service, you are tempted to temporarily divert some of the funds from the donation to keep the outreach program from shutting down. Your justification is the fact that the diversion is temporary until replacement funds could be found, no one would find out about this, and that the use of this money is certainly consistent with the shelter's mission.

What Would You do? *Questions to consider*

- Are you acting ethically by temporarily diverting funds from the donation for this purpose?

- b. Are there any other alternatives you might consider if you feel uncomfortable with diverting these funds?
- c. If you choose to divert these funds, even temporarily, should you be disclosing this to any one?

SECTION 2: STAFF: accountability, honesty and transparency.

1. The situation:

You are a brand-new E.D. with 5 full time and 6 part time staff. You call your first staff meeting, and are excited to bring your team together, and only 2 show up. The others don't even tell you they are not coming. You are angry and cannot believe how insubordinate they are. You had a hard time hiding your frustration when you asked them why they didn't show up and they said they didn't have the time to meet.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Are there currently staff meeting procedures in place?
- b. Is staff meeting attendance part of job descriptions?
- c. How would you communicate to the staff so they understand why attending staff meetings is important?
- d. How could you engage the staff in discussion on what would make staff meetings valuable for them?
- e. How could you create a time for staff meetings that work for the majority of the staff?

2. The situation:

Everyone in your shelter is working as hard as they can – maybe harder than you should be asking them to. You all care about the mission and feel like the work providing services to abused women is unbelievably important. It makes all of you want to work harder for them. But there is a huge problem. The staff misses deadlines all the time. Communication logs are late. Stats are late. The audit is late. Board materials go out late. Reports are late and the quality is not what it should be. Storage rooms are disorganized and no one has time to deal with it. Workspaces are full of piles of papers that seldom get dealt with.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. What is the best method to assess just how many balls your shelter is juggling?
- b. As a leader, how do you make intentional decisions about which balls to drop?
- c. How can you effectively help your staff prioritize what things need to get done against the needs of the clients?

3. The situation:

You have known it for a long time and have done nothing about it. You have to fire the admin assistant. She misses deadlines, you consistently find inaccuracies in her work, and she is often late. But she has been in the shelter way longer than you and is beloved by all. They have no idea how bad she is. The shelter has been lax about performance reviews in the past.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Who is the best person to discuss the situation with?
- b. Can you find someone to give you a few hours of pro bono HR consultation?
- c. Should you create a plan before you bring this to your Board?
- d. What steps will you take to ensure your plan covers all of the bases? (e.g. a 90 day detailed performance improvement plan)
- e. How will you prepare for a meeting with the employee?
- f. What measurable goals can you create to demonstrate your own accountability and leadership going forward?

4. The situation:

Right in the middle of a very busy day, one of your staff approaches you to tell you that another staff person does not pull her weight on shift, says she's lazy, and proceeds to vent many frustrations that have built up over a long time, and bursts into tears.

What Would You do? Questions to consider

- a. What is your first action to create a safe space for your employee?
- b. How do you give yourself time to reflect on the staff's outburst and compose yourself to respond?
- c. Is it more important to ask for the "facts" (objective) of the situation, or to support the "emotional" (subjective) experience of your staff?
- d. How would you empower your staff to look at what they could have done differently in a way that builds their capacity, and maintains their dignity?

5. The situation:

A part time staff applied for a full-time position at the shelter. She has been part time for 4 years, is well liked, and told everyone she had applied. She was not the successful candidate and is extremely upset. Since she shared her disappointment and resentment with her colleagues, everyone is upset on her behalf, and it is affecting staff morale.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. What is the best way to explain the rationale for the decision and connect it to a big picture overview that relates to the mission of the shelter?
- b. Would it be appropriate to share information about yourself to show empathy and caring in acknowledging their disappointment?
- c. How could you encourage self reflection and autonomy to have your staff identify options for growth?
- d. In what ways could you boost your staff member's motivation to enhance their skills and competence?

6. The situation:

You are an innovative, creative Executive Director. You've come up with a terrific plan to create a practical new way to increase shelter storage. You direct your supervisor, Sheila, to work with the staff to accomplish the task. At your next staff meeting, the staff all comment on how, because of Sheila's idea, storage has been improved. Sheila smiles and thanks everyone.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Is this only about Sheila taking credit?
- b. Is there a pattern? Has it happened regularly or is this the first time?
- c. What is the impact of this on your relationship with Sheila?
- d. If all of these issues are relevant, would you choose to address only one or two, or all three? Why?
- e. Do you think it important for Sheila to "own up" to the staff?

7. The situation:

On a walk around through the shelter, you come across a staff person in the office watching YouTube videos. You jokingly say "That's enough, back to work now.", and the staff complies. During another walk around, you see the same staff showing YouTube videos to another staff.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. How would you address the "why" in this situation?
- b. In a one on one session with your staff, what questions would you ask to encourage self reflection about what is fueling their choice of watching videos on the job instead of being productive?
- c. What could you do to support your staff before this behavior negatively affects work relationships, and their employability if they are:
 - a. Demotivated?
 - b. Procrastinating?
 - c. Not getting enough sleep?
 - d. Feeling overwhelmed?
 - e. Other?

8. The situation:

One of your staff consistently goes above and beyond their job description, always going the extra mile, is the first to step forward when additional tasks need to be done, works fast and efficiently, and can be counted on to keep calm in a very busy work environment. As Executive Director, you've come to think of them as your "star staff" and rely on them as your go-to when things need to get done. You find you are now in the habit of no longer delegating tasks because it's easier to communicate with your star staff instead of your whole team.

***What Would You do?** Questions to consider:*

- a. How might your staff be attuned to feeling that you are playing favourites?
- b. What could be the impact on staff morale, work motivation and job satisfaction?
- c. Do you think your favoured staff feels pressure, higher levels of emotional exhaustion, and more interpersonal conflict with coworkers?
- d. What kind of record could you keep of all of your staff, and of how many times you have assigned your favoured staff work that others might like a chance to do?
- e. What steps could you take to ensure growth, development, and fairness among your staff?

9. The situation:

You have been in your executive director role for over 20 years. Recently, you've hired someone who brings the very latest in counseling modalities and up to date skills for working with diverse clients. You're not familiar with all the nuance of what they do, nor their keys to success and find yourself experiencing a bit of imposter syndrome. Because of this, you've been super hands off with them and as a result, communication has broken down between you and this team member.

***What Would You do?** Questions to consider:*

- a. What is the importance of practicing being humble as a leader?
- b. How can being a humble leader increase a culture of trust, and openness?
- c. Does being a humble leader foster a culture of learning and growth?
- d. As you increase your self-awareness of, and admitting, what you don't know, how would you create a plan to address your knowledge gap?
- e. How would you create a plan with your new staff to hold them accountable for the work you are less familiar with?

10. The situation:

During in a long meeting a staff who tends to have strong opinions questions the value of the project development you're all focused on finishing to meet a deadline. "How did we get

here? What made us decide to do this in the first place?" The room goes silent while you are caught off guard.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Would you initially be somewhat shocked, and being mindful of the urgent timeline, change the subject to focus back on the original discussion?
- b. Would you be inclined to take a deep breath, explain the motivations and rationale for the project for the benefit of the whole team and then move on?
- c. Given the tight timeline, how could you engage the team by asking questions for clarification, viewpoints, and perspectives?
- d. Do you feel that the way in which the staff asked the question was disruptive, and would you speak to them 1 – 1 after the meeting?
- e. Going forward how could you encourage staff to challenge the status quo to explore new ideas more fully?

11. The situation:

As Executive Director, you have created an organizational culture where everyone speaks gently in a "respectful manner". Your newest staff member is much more direct and in comparison, you feel their communication style is more abrasive than everyone else's.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. How could you explore whether this is a difference in personality or in culture?
- b. What are some ways in which you can build rapport with the staff?
- c. By using your preferred communication style, how would you coach them on how to slightly smooth their edges?
- d. How do different communication styles affect your team and clients positively and negatively?

SECTION 3: GOSSIP IN THE WORKPLACE

1. The situation:

You've been on the job for nearly a year, and slowly feel like you have a handle on things and that the staff have accepted you and the changes you've begun to implement. You discover your supervisor shared with a staff that she hates one of the new systems you've put in place.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. How have you been communicating information with employees in giving them what they need to adapt to change?
- b. What could be the “why” (e.g. to create an alliance, get revenge, establish intimacy to serve their own agenda) your supervisor chose to speak to a staff about the new system?
- c. What is the possibility that your supervisor does not trust you and is fearful of asking you about important topics?
- d. In setting up a one on one with your supervisor, what steps would you take to resolve this situation?
 - a. Do you see a theme in what could be prohibiting them from speaking directly to you about an issue?
 - b. How would you stress that gossip is not acceptable behavior, and not a way to voice concerns?
 - c. In what ways could you reassure your supervisor that they can come to you directly with questions, issues, or concerns?

2. *The situation:*

You are a new E.D. who has stepped into the shoes of a long-term E.D., and most of the staff have not had to deal with a leadership change during their time as employees. Your leadership style and ideas are quite different from that of your predecessor. You are aware that one of the staff have been spreading rumours about you laying staff off. This has caused staff to speculate about other unsubstantiated changes.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Do you think the first step would be to put out a general message or announcement reminding all staff about spreading rumours?
- b. Might this message unnecessarily send your staff into an existential crisis about whether they're complicit?
- c. How could you squash gossip with transparency and open communication?
- d. What could you do to acknowledge the fears and concerns a change of leadership has created in the staff?
- e. In what way could you reinforce the shelter's mission as a focal point in the work the staff do?
- f. What would be key points to include with a one on one with the rumour spreader to discuss their behaviour?
- g. How would you stress why this behaviour is unacceptable?
- h. What process would you follow to help them link consequences with their actions?

3. The situation:

You have been made aware that two staff regularly make disparaging and critical comments about another staff, passing it off as “just joking”.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. Does your shelter have an up to date policy regarding workplace bullying or harassment?
- b. How would you begin the process of progressive discipline with the two staff?
- c. What steps would you take to create a workplace culture that does not support bullying, including gossip intended to demean people behind their backs?
- d. How would you link these steps with your shelter’s mission and values?
- e. How would you support the staff who was the target of the comments?

Section 4: IN THE SHELTER: CLIENTS

1. The situation:

Judy arrived at the shelter late last night and needs court accompaniment for a Protective Order hearing this morning. Her case is quite severe and involves use of strangulation, weapons, and threats to kill her by her partner who is a law enforcement officer. Prior to Judy's arrival, another resident, Donna, requested transportation and accompaniment to her appointment for transitional housing; she's new to the area and very nervous about her interview. At this time, there's only one staff member who's available to go to one of the appointments.

What Would You do? Questions to consider: Clients with competing needs.

- a. Which appointment should the staff attend with the client? Why?
 1. What other resources/options might be offered to the resident who will not be accompanied by the staff?
 2. How will that message be delivered to each resident in need of and requesting service?
 3. What are the implications for staff relationships with residents in these situations?
 4. Are there conflicting concerns or priorities regarding service provision amongst the staff (case management vs. legal)? What implications do they have in this scenario?
 5. What role might agency policies, program or funding goals, and advocacy philosophy play in this situation?

2. The situation:

Suki has been in the shelter for 2 months now, awaiting final confirmation of her move-in date for transitional housing (it's been rescheduled twice at this point). She's becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow response from the Housing Authority, and with the rules of the shelter, which she finds to be very limiting and too strict for a grown woman in her 40's. On a few occasions, she has been in conflict with other residents that staff have managed to diffuse. This morning, Suki's frustrations boiled over, she asked to speak to you as the Executive Director, started screaming and made physically threatening gestures. Several residents saw this happen and now Suki has stormed out of the shelter.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. How do you respond to the residents who have witnessed this entire exchange?
- b. What will be the staff response to Suki when she returns to the shelter?
- c. What are the implications for your continued service provision to Suki?
- d. How might Suki's past experiences with domestic violence and at the shelter, including past conflicts with staff, contribute to this situation?
- e. What role might shelter rules, program or funding goals, and advocacy philosophy play in this situation?

3. The situation:

Recently, Kelly, the overnight weekend staff at the shelter, was out sick for a few days. Staff who filled in for her reported that a few women came in past curfew and two of them appeared inebriated. They made lots of noise and disturbed several of the children who had already been put to bed. When confronted by the relief staff, the residents said that Kelly lets them come in when they want to because it's the weekend and she believes they need more freedom in the shelter. To date, as Executive Director, you've received no reports that residents in the shelter have come in past curfew, however you are aware that one of the women that came in late has a history of substance abuse.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. As Kelly's supervisor, how do you manage this situation upon her return?
- b. How do you respond to the residents that have been "breaking shelter rules" with the permission of shelter staff?
- c. Noting the past experiences of each of the women that came in past curfew, including victimization, shelter living, and various interactions with staff, how might those experiences have contributed to this situation?
- d. What role might agency policy, shelter rules, and advocacy philosophy play in this situation?

- e. What are the implications for staff relationships with residents in the shelter? Consider those that were involved and those that were not.
- f. How do you raise and discuss these issues at your next staff meeting? Consider whether there are factors that make exceptions to rules necessary. Who should be making that judgment and on what basis?

SECTION 5: BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND CONFLICT:

1. The situation:

Your Board of Directors occasionally has constructive disagreements about what is best for the shelter. However, two board members have had a disagreement that has become intense and personal, and has interfered with them carrying out their board responsibilities. As Executive Director, you have strong feelings about the issues that created the disagreement.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. As Executive Director, do you believe you have a role in “managing” the board? If yes, is this in your job description?
- b. If the conflict is left unaddressed, what are the implications for your shelter?
- c. What should your be role in managing the conflict?
- d. How will you maintain your impartiality and trust with your board?
- e. How can you support the board chair in taking the lead in managing the conflict? (e.g. conflict analysis, process design)
- f. If the board chair is uncomfortable in dealing with the conflict, how might you access another leader (e.g. past board chair) who has experience in conflict management, be viewed as impartial, and be objective about the issues.

2. The situation:

A staff member has brought what they feel is an unresolved conflict with you directly to the board, saying she finds you difficult to deal with. As a result, the board has questioned your leadership in maintaining staff harmony, and regards the staff’s action as an indication of your lack of management skills.

What Would You do? Questions to consider:

- a. *Does your shelter have an existing board, executive director, and staff communication policy?*

- b. *Are all your board members aware of the communication policy and why it exists?*
- c. *Do you know if all of your staff are made aware of the communication policy as part of their orientation?*
- d. *How will you communicate with the board member(s) who received the complaint? (e.g., the substance of the concern raised by the staff, including how you are/have been handling the conflict, and the problems created by not following the communication policy.)*
- e. *How do you determine if the staff was unaware of the policy or chose not to follow protocol?*
- f. *How could you explore what motivated the staff? (e.g. feeling unsupported, that other avenues were closed, angry)*
- g. *What support would you need to work through the conflict with the staff?*
- h. *What support would the staff need to work through the conflict with you?*
- i. *How would you structure a discussion with the staff about the expectation that the shelter's communication policy be followed, and the consequences of disregarding the policy?*
- j. *How could you take disciplinary action (based on an existing policy) while setting a positive tone for resolving the conflict?*
- k. *What are some strategies for rebuilding trust with your board and rebuilding their trust in your leadership?*

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