

Policies to improve nutrition at work: The Case of Rainbow Services, Oregon

Organization history

Rainbow Services is an employee-owned organization that provides a wide range of services to people to enhance their personal and professional lives. Services include counseling, group programs, professional development, and individual support and companionship. Many clients are in a period of transition due to sudden changes in employment or health status. The organization was founded in 2001 by Suzie Queue. She felt that Oregonians could survive and thrive through difficult times if they had the skills and tools that she used to overcome a life of poverty and abuse. To cover costs beyond what clients can be expected to pay for directly, Rainbow Services receives funds from private donors, foundations, and small government grants.

Company Demographics

Employees:

- 25 full time, 20 part time
- 75% female, 25% male
- Mean age – 37
- 72% Caucasian, 16% Latino, 12% African American

30% of the staff are in administration, with no direct client contact

40% of the staff have offices, with most client contact within the office setting

30% of the staff do not have dedicated office space - they are usually in the field with clients, but come to the office for meetings and group sessions at least once a week

Average salary - \$34,000

Educational attainment - 35% college degrees, 30% some college, 35% high school,

Setting:

Rainbow Services is in a small Oregon city that, until the 1990's, had an economy based on traditional Oregon industries - fishing and paper products. The high school graduation rate is 72% - slightly higher than the state average of 66%.

Rainbow Services is housed in two locations. The Home Office has 12 staff (5 part time) and is in the same location in which it was started 10 years ago, on Main Street. The office is on the second floor of a ‘vintage’ building. It was above a travel agency until 2 years ago, when that business closed, and a convenience store moved in.

About a half mile away, 2 blocks off Main Street, the Sunshine Office includes therapy rooms and classrooms where clients come for services. It is in a small office building, shared by two other businesses. One business is shared by the sales office of a small company that provides products for the home. The other is a private technical school aimed at giving young adults job skills. The Sunshine Office has 20 employees, with 9 part time.

Company culture

Rainbow Services was founded on the values of support, compassion, and self-empowerment. At a time when the economy of Oregon was changing dramatically, and the country was reeling from the tragedy of 9/11, Suzie Queue felt a calling to help others who were dealing with life’s challenges. She risked what little she had to start a business that would enable her to share skills that helped her through her own challenges and provide services to others in her community who were hurting. She sought grants and donations, and worked tirelessly to establish the first programs. She hired only people she felt shared the same passion to help others, and made them all owners of the business.

Despite being challenged to balance the budget each month, there is a concerted effort by Suzie and her managers to create an aura of calm and support at Rainbow Services. There are frequent challenges posed by outdated technology, staff turnover, increased need, and lack of stable funding. Employees are often reminded that ‘you cannot have a rainbow without the rain!’ when the workload feels greater than the staff can handle.

Suzie believes it is critical to keep up staff morale. She tries to show her staff they are valuable to the organization by recognizing birthdays and other special events in their lives. Each Wednesday, everyone is invited to share lunch together in the classroom at the Sunshine Office. She encourages people to talk about their vacations and holiday celebrations, as well as challenges they are going through. Suzie feels that providing a culture of support in an overworked and stressed environment is essential to keeping Sunshine Services going.

Currently, the workforce is the largest it has been since the organization began, although almost half of the staff is part time. Although all employees are considered owners, Suzie and her managers make all the important decisions. The organization is surviving, but is very 'lean' and employees often feel overworked, underpaid, and stressed. Competition from publicly funded clinics, and the death of two major donors have led to losses in revenue over the past few years. Employees know there are few other options in their community to do this work they feel so passionate about, so they work as hard as they can and try to get through each day intact.

The Food Environment at Rainbow Services

Employees do not have access to a cafeteria. There are two vending machines in the building with the Sunshine Office. One has soda and bottled water, and the other has candy and snacks. The water costs more than the soda, and the nuts and granola bars are more expensive than the candy bars. There is a refrigerator that staff and clients can use in a break room.

The Home Office has limited space, so there is no refrigerator. There is a small microwave sitting on a side table in a meeting space that also serves as a break area. Now that there is a convenience store downstairs, employees frequently purchase inexpensive items for lunch, such as hot dogs, tater tots, and cheese pizza. In fact, the owner has started a 'frequent buyer' program where people get a free hot dog or slice of cheese pizza after purchasing 10. They also offer 'value meals' each day which include a soft drink, chips and a cookie for only a dollar more.

Food is part of the culture of Rainbow Services. Like many people, Suzie feels that food is a sign of hospitality, and she feels it can be used to ease the stress in the workplace. She keeps a candy dish at the front desk full with chocolates and caramels. Every Monday morning she brings in pastries as a way to show her staff that she appreciates them, and to help make Mondays a bit easier.

One of her supervisors is taking a cake decorating class, and each week she brings in a 'practice' cake to share at the Wednesday lunch. It's also common for others to bring in treats and leave them in the meeting room for people to enjoy. You can always tell when Halloween and Christmas are over because the candy is everywhere!

Clients who participate in group sessions at the Sunshine Office are welcome to bring in food to share with others as a way to build trust and support among the members. Cookies and brownies tend to be favorites.

The Opportunity to Help

At your last Community Health Action Committee (CHAC) meeting, the group was talking about worksite wellness, and how they wanted to work with employers. A member of the CHAC, Ruby Jean, talked about her daughter Katie, who is an entry level supervisor at Rainbow Services, based at the Sunshine Office. Katie is only 35, but seems to have suddenly gained 15 pounds since she started working there a year ago. She was just told by her doctor that she has pre-diabetes. Unless she is able to loose some weight and stay active, she will likely develop diabetes – a condition that puts her at risk for other serious health problems.

Katie mentioned to her mother that when she looks around at her co-workers, she notices that many of them are also overweight, and probably have similar health risks. While people often complain about having ‘put on a few pounds’, and several have started diets, it’s clear they don’t stick to them when the cakes and cookies show up.

Katie is trying to loose weight, but is discouraged when she is not able to resist the food that is available at work. She tried to change things by bringing in a vegetable tray once, but no one seemed interested in it – the brownies were much more popular. She has casually mentioned to people over the past few months that they should have healthier food around the office, but people actually seemed offended, particularly the cake decorator. She wants to maintain good relationships with her co-workers, but she also wants to take control of her health.

It is in your workplan to work with at least one workplace to adopt and implement a nutrition policy. Here is your opportunity!