



The Ottawa Humane Society: Maintaining Growth & Success During a Global Pandemic

Growing and maintaining success is a challenge that all shelters face, and this challenge becomes even more daunting when you add in unexpected environmental factors—for example, a global pandemic. However, it is possible to overcome such obstacles and maintain your shelter’s growth and success. We had the pleasure of seeing one of our clients improve substantially over time and then maintain their growth and success throughout the pandemic.

The Ottawa Humane Society has been participating in SeeDS since 2015, and in previous assessments, the shelter struggled with communication, stress, and burnout as many shelters do. After participating in SeeDS and getting specific recommendations to address these issues, their leadership actively integrated the feedback into their five-year plan. In 2022, they received a glowing report for their bi-annual SeeDS assessment, showing that they not only managed to grow and improve their areas of concern, but also maintain that growth throughout the pandemic. Bruce Roney, CEO of The Ottawa Humane Society, met with our team to share how they implemented strategies that helped keep his shelter’s momentum going. Here’s what he had to say:

Communicate—Concisely & Regularly

Bruce attributes The Ottawa Humane Society’s ability to handle change and roll with the punches largely to their communication strategy. They use a weekly bulletin to update their employees on need-to-know information (e.g., updated COVID-19 deadlines, upcoming shelter

events). He emphasized two key components to executing the weekly bulletin successfully. First, keep it brief. Employees can become overwhelmed with too much information being thrown at them, so keeping the bulletin down to just the things employees need to know to do their jobs is imperative. Second, make the communication accessible. If half of your employees are working from home, an in-person bulletin won't reach everyone. Instead, sending weekly communications via email in addition to posting a bulletin can help spread the information to everyone.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

One of The Ottawa Humane Society's biggest strengths on their most recent SeeDS assessment was their standard operating procedures (SOPs). SOPs are an area that many shelters struggle with, so we asked Bruce what The Ottawa Humane Society does differently. His advice was to leverage technology to make sure everyone is on the same (virtual) page when it comes to SOPs. Printed copies of SOPs can be useful for employees who don't have easy access to a computer, but they can often be a source of confusion and misinformation if they aren't properly updated. Bruce recommends that employees reference SOPs through a computer system so they always see the most recent information. If printed SOPs need to be used, it's important to toss the old ones in the recycling bin and print new ones whenever a change is made.

Dealing With Burnout

Shelters work hard to try and prevent employee burnout as much as possible and working through a crisis creates an added layer of difficulty when it comes to this issue. Bruce has been at The Ottawa Humane Society for over 20 years, and he acknowledged that working in crisis mode for two years was hard on his employees. His team had to be intentional about preventing and handling burnout. He shared two main strategies that helped limit burnout at his shelter. His first

piece of advice: “Everything is HR.” By providing resources to the HR team, shelters can recruit excellent talent that can tackle the work that needs to be done.

His second strategy focuses on the role of management. He noted, “I don’t encourage managers to be psychiatrists.” Managers aren’t trained to help employees work through internal struggles and asking them to do so only puts more work on their plates, potentially leading to their own stress and burnout. Added to that, this approach probably doesn’t provide the resources that employees actually need to support them. Instead, Bruce tasks his managers with creating an environment where employees are aware of their resources (time off, wellness programs, etc.) and are *encouraged* to use those resources. Bruce explained that having an environment where it’s normal for employees to actually use their time off rather than feeling guilty about doing so helps prevent employees from burning out—positioning them to better perform their life-saving roles when they return.

Looking Forward

The Ottawa Humane Society has done an excellent job of growing and maintaining their success, even during a pandemic. What’s next for them, you might ask? Bruce says they are looking forward to getting back on track with their five-year plan, part of which is to grow their community involvement through new outreach programs. These and other future initiatives show how rather than becoming complacent with their current success, the Ottawa Humane Society is carefully planning how to continue building upon their hard work. This approach has led to maintained growth and success at the organization and has made Bruce’s team an exemplar for what we strive to accomplish here at SeeDS. We look forward to seeing this momentum continue for Bruce and the Ottawa Humane Society moving forward as well as for the many other animal welfare organizations we partner with.