



Putting compensation data to work: How a small nonprofit assessed their compensation program

Scott Robertson was fairly confident that the Boys & Girls Clubs of Kawartha Lakes [www.bgckl.com] were doing well by their staff. Although on paper the organization experienced a lot of turnover, the churn was driven mainly by the students and part-time staff who ran things like sports camps and after-school programs. Among the Clubs' approximately 45 full-time staff, turnover was very low.

"It's not that we pay huge salaries," says Robertson. "We can't. But our staff do get a lot of autonomy, which I think they appreciate. If you're a department head with us—if you're involved in recreation programs or something related to social work—we set some parameters but you have a lot of freedom to design programs and try things out. That gives people a big sense of ownership over their work."

This sense of ownership and autonomy is, of course, related to a sense of impact on the communities they serve. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Kawartha Lakes provides summer camps, before and after school programs, early learning/licensed child care, child and youth counseling, infant development, and sports, recreation and adventure programs in ten local communities. Significantly, clubs remove financial barriers to participation by keeping program costs affordable and subsidizing all programs for families who can't afford to pay. One part of the staff experience is occasionally hearing feedback like this remark from a young participant: the Boys and Girls Clubs "finds skills and abilities no one else would, and looks for the best in you."

Although feedback like that is reward in itself, it's also true that only talented staff can achieve that kind

of impact. Robertson and his colleagues take seriously their responsibility to be vigilant about how their compensation program is measuring up, to ensure that they can hold onto the dedicated staff who deliver services at their current standard. True, when they began their compensation survey process, turnover did not seem to be an urgent issue. And although their budget did not permit them to make huge adjustments in any case, Robertson's team still thought it was important to be aware of any areas in which their organization was falling too far behind.

One might expect that an organization like Robertson's would have a useful pool of compensation data at hand, since Boys & Girls Clubs are united under a national umbrella organization. In communities across the country, there are people doing jobs similar to those done by Robertson's staff. But the differences among the various communities the Clubs serve make comparisons difficult.

"In Kawartha Lakes," Robertson explains, "we're an amalgamated city made up of lots of small pockets of population. It's hard to compare our Boys & Girls Clubs to other small-town Clubs because we look so much bigger on paper, in terms of budget and staff numbers. On the other hand, it's not appropriate to compare ourselves to somewhere like Toronto because in an urban area like that the cost of living there is so much higher." The Clubs had to look farther afield to find organizations against which it could usefully compare its compensation program. The national body of Boys & Girls Clubs recommended the Peter T. Boland & Associates [www.ptbaconsulting.com] survey of nonprofits.

Participating in—and learning from—the compensation survey

The Boys & Girls Clubs decided to make use of the Boland compensation survey of nonprofits, as recommended by their national organization. In order to access the data, they needed to take two steps. First, they were required to share their own compensation information. Second, they had to pay a fee. Robertson found both of these manageable: “The cost was pretty affordable, and the survey wasn’t too time-consuming.”

Robertson noted that the hardest part of completing the survey was also the hardest part of interpreting the final data: making sure that his own organization’s positions were aligned with the positions being described in the survey. “There are a lot of different job categories. I wouldn’t say it’s complicated or difficult, but you do just have to be careful and meticulous, and read closely to make sure that you’re matching the jobs in your organization with the right jobs in the wider system that the Boland survey team is using,” says Robertson. A couple of phone calls between Peter Boland’s consultancy and Robertson were sufficient to clear up any areas of uncertainty and reassure Robertson that he was interpreting the data properly.

On the whole, the news from the survey was pretty good. “There were a number of areas in which we weren’t as far behind as we had feared. And on benefits in particular, there were a lot of interesting findings—and we were quite pleased with how well we were doing,” Robertson reflects.

It was at the leadership salary level that the Boys & Girls Clubs of Kawartha Lakes was least competitive: two positions in particular lagged behind the wider market in terms of the extent to which they were compensated. “But we were happy to see that, by and large, we were in line with other organizations of our size,” says Robertson.

Acting on the insights from the data

Robertson notes that his organization is taking some steps to try to keep up in the salary department. They have made cost-of-living adjustments over the last couple of years, and are working on closing the salary gap at the leadership level. Every step has to be carefully considered. “Changing salaries can feel like turning the Queen Mary,” Robertson says. “Of course you want to compensate people appropriately. But we are in very uncertain times on the funding front, and you don’t want to make commitments you can’t keep, or make choices that aren’t sustainable. We’re trying to stay as competitive as we can, while being cautious and practical. You have to do your best with what you have.”

Between solid benefits, reasonable salaries, and a positive organizational culture, the Boys and Girls Clubs are delivering on their mission and maintaining low turnover rates. All this suggests that for the time being, doing their best is doing the trick.

Ongoing monitoring

How will the Boys & Girls Clubs track their progress to see if they are maintaining their position over time? A combination of formal data collection such as the Boland survey and more informal pulse-taking. “This year has given us a good benchmark,” says Robertson. “I think maybe for the next while we’ll do more informal environmental scans just to keep our costs down. But in two or three years, sure—we’ll review a more rigorous study and see how we’re measuring up.”