The Commonwealth Fund

Key Facts

» Location: New York, NY; Washington D.C.; Boston, MA
» Year Founded: 1918
» Assets: $690MM

The Commonwealth Fund seeks to “promote a high-performing health care system” by supporting research and being an information resource for the health care field. With its penchant for research and information, it is not surprising that the Fund has been dedicated to collecting and monitoring data about its staff’s experiences working at the Fund.

The Fund first commissioned a Staff Perception Report (SPR) from the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) in 2005. CEP surveyed the staff and reported, on average, how staff rated the Fund on a variety of dimensions compared to results for other foundations. On the measure of staff satisfaction, the Fund ranked in the bottom quartile. Fund leaders made significant changes based on staff’s feedback, and continued to commission the SPR regularly to measure the impact of their efforts.

In 2011, the Fund commissioned its fifth SPR and saw its rating rise to the top quartile on staff satisfaction. “I always believe that you improve what you measure,” explains John Craig, executive vice president and chief operating officer. “We wanted to see how we were doing. And it has helped us spot areas that needed work, and get to the sources of them.” The foundation has worked to become a high-performing workplace by focusing on recruiting the right people, providing staff with opportunities to grow professionally and gain a balance of empowerment and support in their role, and helping staff understand that their work is valued.

Finding the Right People

In their efforts to improve the experience of staff, the Fund’s leaders made considerable changes to the recruiting process. “Being able to recruit and retain first-rate people has a lot to do with our success as a foundation,” explains Karen Davis, president of the Fund. Over time, the Fund’s hiring teams have focused more and more on searching for the candidates who are most passionate about carrying out the work needed to accomplish the Fund’s goals.
The Fund’s recruiting process is rigorous. In addition to interviewing with staff, candidates must submit two writing samples, fill out a six-page application, and take a test assessing their skills for the job, all of which give the Fund a sense of how well candidates can execute the responsibilities of the position for which they are applying. The process also gives candidates a better understanding of how the Fund works and the expectations of staff there. “We try not to hire anyone who does not have demonstrated interest, education, or experience in health care policy and access issues. One of our guiding principles is to advance our staff, so we are determined to hire people who will benefit most from the experience at the Fund,” says Diana Davenport, vice president of administration.

The process has brought in staff who care deeply about improving the quality of health care in the United States. “There’s a lot of passion in my colleagues,” says Annie Shek, grants associate. “Passion is something that’s pretty apparent when you’re here.”

Over the years, the Fund’s leaders have realized that to attract staff of the caliber they want, they need to make the foundation more conducive to staff satisfaction. The recruiting process does not succeed unless candidates “perceive the Fund as a good place to work, a good place for them professionally, and a good place for them personally,” says Davis. How satisfied staff members are also matters to the Fund because when staff are satisfied, “they’re more productive, they generate better work, they inspire others, and they’re good partners with grantees,” says Davis.

**A Focus on Learning and Development**

Once staff members have been hired, the Fund invests heavily in developing them professionally. “We believe it’s as important to develop our people as it is to develop our grants and the programs that we’re working on,” says Davenport. To that end, the Fund offers a generous tuition assistance program, extensive room for growth within roles, and opportunities that prepare staff members well for their careers beyond the Fund.

The tuition-assistance program provides staff with financial support to pursue an advanced degree while they are working at the Fund. The program covers $8,000 toward tuition costs for a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Because staff members typically take advantage of this opportunity at a nearby university, the Fund gives them flexibility in their schedules to balance work and school. Staff members are encouraged to take advantage of the program. “This is a program that I’ve been looking at for a really long time, and now I have the opportunity to do it while still having the security of a full-time position,” says Jennie Smith, program associate. “And I received a lot of encouragement. Six months in, staff started asking me, ‘Are you thinking about it? What are you thinking about?’ They were supportive and interested in what I would do.”

The Fund also provides staff members with many in-house development opportunities. For example, junior program staff can contribute to the Fund’s blog and papers, eventually moving up to help co-author papers and receive public recognition for their work. Publishing papers in prestigious health policy journals is a stepping stone for staff “into a policy world where they’ll be recognized and be publishing in major peer journals,” says Craig. If a research paper is accepted at a national conference, staff members are afforded the opportunity to present it to prominent leaders in the field.
As is true at many foundations, not all roles at the Fund have a well-defined path for progression. Rather than view that as a barrier, the Fund thinks of all its positions as “stretch” positions in which staff can continue to gain skills and broaden their area of responsibility. “One of the beauties of a small organization is that you can sort of make the job fit the person, whereas in a large organization, the person has to do the job that’s defined,” says Davenport.

**Respect and Recognition**

“It matters a lot to Karen and me, and I think to all of the managers here, that we are people who value people,” says Craig. “It’s just part of our nature and the kind of qualities that we look for. It’s really important that people feel valued and are respected.”

The Fund’s leaders demonstrate their respect for staff by recognizing their contributions to the foundation. Every month, Davis publishes the “President’s Staff Update,” which features stories and pictures of Commonwealth staff presenting its research externally. “It’s just something about seeing staff in action and presenting at a conference, or surrounded by members of Congress, or on TV, that conveys something that goes far beyond the words,” says Davis. She sends the staff update to the board chairman, too, so that staff know their contributions are being recognized at the highest level of the foundation.

**A Balance of Empowerment and Support**

As staff members continuously learn and grow at the Fund, they are given more autonomy in their roles. Commonwealth supervisors also provide support to staff as they navigate the challenges of increased autonomy. “While there’s got to be a lot of delegation and authority at the grassroots level, you can’t make a major mistake. So you need to support your people by making sure there’s adequate quality review as well,” says Davis.

Within the first year that Senior Program Officer Pamela Riley joined the Fund, she was given the responsibility for setting the strategy for the Fund’s Vulnerable Populations program. Her supervisor helped her through the development process but gave her the authority to choose the ultimate strategy. Riley described the experience as one where “I could always go to my supervisor if I had questions or needed help.” But, at the same time, “my supervisor had enough confidence in my abilities to let me make the ultimate decision,” she says.

For all staff, success in mastering fundamental responsibilities opens the door to gaining more authority. While Davis and the executive management team set the priorities and the direction, Craig says they then “like to give people a lot of room to run. I know myself, in my area, I set standards and indicate clear directions, but then I don’t want to get into how people are doing their jobs. And, to me, that’s empowerment: If they feel that they are on their own to accomplish their objective, people will feel empowered.”

Davis also records accomplishments of staff and the organization in a document called the “Selected Kudos List.” It includes recognition of staff members who have been promoted and praise for the Fund’s work. The list can also include notable citations of the Fund’s research. “The President of the United States quoted a number from our recent report on young adults — it was that 6.6 million young adults are covered under their parents’ health insurance policy. So, that would be on the kudos list: ‘President Uses Commonwealth Fund Number,’” says Davis.

Riley believes that “it’s very clear that when you work here, that [the Fund’s leaders] really value you, not just as an employee but [also] as a person. They’re very supportive of their employees, and you really can tell that they invest in their staff because they want them to stay.”