The work of The Skillman Foundation is difficult: Its mission is to provide “resources to improve the lives of children in Metropolitan Detroit by improving their homes, schools, and neighborhoods.” The experience that foundation staff have in working to carry out this challenging work is a primary concern for the foundation’s leadership team. Carol Goss, president of the Foundation, recognizes that “we can’t do this work if people don’t feel supported and if they’re not happy.”

Skillman first commissioned a Staff Perception Report (SPR) from CEP in 2007. CEP surveyed all staff and reported, on average, how staff rated the foundation on a variety of dimensions compared to results for other foundations. On the measure of staff satisfaction, Skillman ranked in the top quartile. In 2011, the foundation again commissioned an SPR, and their average rating of staff satisfaction remained in the top quartile.

Tonya Allen, chief operating officer and vice president of program, recognizes the fragility of a positive work culture and the importance of tending to it. “I’m really trying to focus on how we retain and reinforce the good things about our culture and not just take it for granted,” she says. To do this, the foundation’s leadership team works to ensure that all staff members have a clear understanding of where the foundation is heading and take an active role in building the foundation’s culture. In turn, staff survey responses suggest that staff members recognize how devoted the foundation is to creating a positive experience for them.

**Working with a Purpose**

Skillman’s leadership team has made it a priority to provide staff with the information and resources necessary to perform at their highest level. “We have very high expectations of people. And if you’re going to have those high expectations around their work and their performance, then you have to provide the right support to them so that they can live up to it,” says Goss. Having a clear understanding of how their work contributes to the foundation’s progress positions staff to excel in their day-to-day work. Allen explains, “The Skillman Foundation has a really big vision and a really big agenda for change, and the only way that we get that agenda for change to actually happen is to be coherent and committed to it internally.”
Henry McClendon, program officer, says his desire to make a difference in the community motivates him in his work at the foundation. “I really want to see Detroit change, and the foundation is at the core of that work,” he says. “Being able to be a part of that is compelling and rewarding.”

Programmatic staff get a chance to understand the foundation’s work through their regular interactions with Skillman’s partners and grantees. For staff members whose work is more internally focused, Skillman provides them opportunities to observe the foundation’s work by attending neighborhood meetings and events featuring the foundation’s beneficiaries. Staff Accountant Holly Elsner attended one of these events, a Skillman Scholars Luncheon. “I was able to bear witness to students who had received scholarships from the foundation to attend private high schools [and] who were on their way to college in the upcoming fall because of our support,” says Elsner. “For me, personally, taking the time to get out of the office to be around the children who are the focus of our work provides a very satisfying opportunity to see the impressive results our efforts as a foundation can achieve.”

Skillman staff also have the opportunity to develop a broader view of the foundation by learning about the perspectives of their board of trustees. After each board meeting, Goss holds a staff-wide discussion about the board members’ thoughts on the foundation’s work. These conversations create a sense of alignment among staff, leadership, and the board. “It’s a really good give-and-take conversation that allows staff to share their perception and reach a consensus on the expectations of the trustees moving forward,” says Elsner.

**Staff’s Ownership of Foundation Culture**

The foundation’s leadership actively seeks to understand the challenges staff face in their day-to-day work and to involve staff members in developing solutions. “What I’m trying to build here, along with our senior team, is a culture that’s really open and allows for honest and authentic discourse,” says Goss. “So, staff can come to us and say that something isn’t going well or that something is going well.”

Five years ago, Goss initiated a mechanism called “Skip-Level Meetings,” during which she goes out to lunch with staff members without the company of their supervisors. These meetings provide staff with a direct line of communication to Goss, without the middle layer of direct supervisors. “I think this [practice] creates an environment where people feel like they can talk to me… and they can raise issues about how we do our work,” she says.

This feedback mechanism has helped Goss and the senior leadership team address staff’s concerns as they arise. Through one meeting, Goss learned that program associates were struggling to understand how their role fit within the foundation’s structure. Their confusion came as a surprise to Goss. “I’ll be really honest with you. I didn’t understand it…. I couldn’t get my head around it. So with this one group, the program associates, we went to lunch. And they just started talking about [how] they weren’t an administrative assistant or a secretary, but they weren’t a program officer. So they didn’t really know what they were supposed to do.”

Goss set up an internal committee charged with the responsibility of clarifying the program associate role based on these staff members’ skills and the needs of the foundation. The committee recommended that these staff members’ job titles be changed from “Program Associates” to “Program Managers” and the job description be changed to reflect their responsibility for providing support for program officers’ projects. With their more clearly defined roles, the newly named program managers were better positioned to use their skills to contribute to the foundation.

The foundation’s approach to improvement empowers staff by giving them a voice in the foundation’s processes. “I do think that people feel empowered,” says Goss. “At some point, somebody is in charge. So you don’t have total autonomy. But you do have the capacity and availability to really indicate your own opinions and thoughts about the direction we’re going, the policies and practices we’re putting in place, the grant-making that we’re doing, and how effective it’s becoming.”

**Dedication to Staff**

Leadership makes it clear to staff that the foundation is dedicated to their overall well-being. Elsner says, “This is my first experience working in the nonprofit sector, as well as a small office, and I truly enjoy it. It’s amazing to see the personal interest that [leadership] takes not only in our work, but in the morale of their staff.”
Leadership's consideration for what it's like to work at the foundation has helped to maintain staff morale, particularly when the foundation has gone through periods of change. Recently, the foundation faced a need to change its health benefits due to rising health care costs. Instead of changing the health benefits policy based solely on the foundation's financial need, leadership sought to find a plan that would minimize the burden on staff. To understand what aspects of their benefits staff valued the most, Skillman's CFO, Danielle Olekszyk, administered an anonymous survey to all staff. The results were clear: staff members wanted to keep their individual health care providers. To make that possible, leadership sought out a new plan that would reduce the foundation's costs but also allow staff to retain their current providers.

Elsner appreciates the effort to prioritize the needs of staff in making this decision. “At the end of the day, they’re still the managers and they have to make the best decision for the foundation. But the fact that they asked for our input and care how it affects us means a lot,” she says.

The foundation’s internal feedback mechanisms and staff-driven committees hold the foundation accountable to its values and gives staff confidence that leadership does “try to create an environment that supports [staff] in doing the highest quality of work,” says Goss.

For Elsner, that confidence translates into trust. “The senior management team is a really great team, and they know what they’re doing,” she says. “I trust the leadership a great deal.”

Allen says, “It’s important to me that as an organization, our staff are satisfied, they’re fully engaged, they feel empowered, they are functioning as a high-performing team, and that they ultimately feel like they are making impact that the organization hopes to achieve.”

From the back row, left to right: Henry McClendon and Tamalon Meeks; Holly Elsner and Danielle Skoniesk; Marie Colombo.