CREATING MORE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

By Seth Kahan

Carrie Speckart, SPHR, implements consensus-based decision making to increase the effectiveness of recruiting and create a more diverse and inclusive workforce that hits the ground running.
Carrie Speckart, a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR®), is the associate director of Human Resources for the Trust for Public Land. She has been at her job for seven years, making the world a better place for people to play and delighting in the process. She is a high-level HR generalist, taking on a wide variety of tasks including recruitment.

Her other duties include being an employee relations specialist for one-third of the staff; providing HR advice to managers across the organization; conducting HR policy and procedure improvement research and development; administering the HR database with report writing, running payroll and general database management; conducting training on HR-related topics such as open enrollment, the performance review process, diversity and inclusion and recognition; and being the HR lead for the organization’s Diversity Initiative and Workforce Planning through working with finance and department heads.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit that conserves land for the public to enjoy as parks, gardens, historic sites, rural lands and other natural places. The organization’s work spans from inner city to wilderness. It has helped states, counties and cities to generate more than $34 billion for local conservation.

The TPL website states that “Every $1 invested in this program has yielded more than $2,000 in new public funds.” I asked Speckart what that means, and she said, “We have a team that works on local and state ballot measures that support land conservation that is incredibly effective. They are experts at getting the right people involved, galvanizing public support, and writing ballot measures that people vote yes on. Last year, 77 percent of ballot measures that we supported passed, creating over $500 million in funding for land conservation across the country. So, when you break down our investment in that team and marketing versus the amount of money that is approved you get the 1-to-2000 ratio.”

Before arriving at TPL Speckart worked at Kaiser Permanente, a much larger organization. There she had the opportunity to participate in the kind of state-of-the-art HR practices a well-established, well-resourced corporation offers. She brought her expertise and experience with her to TPL, which has a staff of 330 and is headquartered in San Francisco.

At Kaiser she learned how to strategically compare a job description to a candidate’s résumé and measure the fit of the candidate to the job objectively. She would create a spreadsheet and then assign candidates points based on how well the skills and experience on their résumé matched the job description. This provided an evidence-based ranking system for candidates.

Through a collaboration between unions and management at Kaiser called the Labor Management Partnership, Speckart learned a standardized method for processing organizational issues and using shared decision-making techniques and an open-minded, fact-based, goal-oriented approach to find solutions that work for everyone. Speckart said, “I learned a lot from that process. It was consensus based, but structured.”

Because Kaiser is an organization with tens of thousands of employees, she witnessed expert project managers working to implement systems. Speckart stated, “I learned a lot from collaborating on projects with these staff. When I got to the Trust for Public Land, project managing improvements in an approximately 300-person nonprofit did not seem so daunting. The experience at Kaiser gave me confidence.

“I started right off the bat tightening up recruitment, standardizing the process, making sure hiring managers used behavioral-based questions and training them on the impact of bias so they could be more objective and get better results,” Speckart said. “There is a feeling in the environmental movement that everyone is a fleece-wearing backpacker type. That is a very narrow slice of the universe of people who have talent in our world. We worked to create a database of questions and training that were related to the job description itself.”

In addition to increasing the quality of hiring practices by bringing more rigor to the interview and selection processes, Speckart made sure that staff received the education they needed nationwide to get it right. She helped them to expand their thinking and focus their intentions to get better results. This made it possible for them to do the work ahead of time that improved the quality of their hires by choosing people who were much better fitted to the job they would do.

“I did a comprehensive training across the country for all managers. We covered the basics of good recruitment techniques including taking the time upfront to think about the ideal set of skills and knowledge candidates should have,” Speckart said.
Hiring requires both advance preparation so that employers know exactly what they are looking for as well as self-knowledge so that hiring managers can get out of their own way, avoiding the natural tendency to be influenced by their inclinations and predilections. By providing education to illustrate how bias distorts insight, Speckart was able to effectively limit the poor choices that result. This helped her staff do a better job of listening to people who think differently from them, yet can excel at their work. Speckart stated, “I reviewed the impact of bias. For example, the person you trust the most is likely a person just like you. But that may not be the best person for the job.”

Speckart created an online process for checking references that pooled responses for a particular candidate, provided anonymity to the references and clearly indicated which candidates were better suited to specific positions. She said, “We implemented a web-based reference check system. In addition to calling references by phone, we poll them with a set of questions and a couple of open-ended questions. The system combines several people’s responses. It is confidential and provides objective data on which candidates are strong or weak.”

Her experience at Kaiser continued to bear fruit by providing her with relevant expertise she could apply at TPL. The application of this knowledge has generated significant measurable results. “One of the things I learned from Kaiser was that medicine is based on data, and management, too, can be based on data. I applied that here and have gotten great results,” she stated. “Our turnover rate is around 7 percent, which I am very proud of. There is less drama in the workplace than there used to be because people understand their roles better and are in the right jobs. It has created a lot of clarity here.”

TPL’s offices across the country vary in size, culture, expertise and focus area. So, a cookie-cutter approach won’t work. This makes consistent and widespread organizational transformation difficult. At the same time, the internal environment of TPL is very supportive. Speckart said, “The culture in this organization is very down-to-Earth and inclusive. We have about 30 offices across the country. We are a highly distributed company, which makes change challenging. Traveling across the country made a big difference. I am very passionate about recruitment and finding the right people for our organization.”

I asked Speckart for an example and she told me about a diversity training she delivered to staff at various locations. “The goal of the training was to share practical tools to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace. While I had the same deck of slides for each office and the same basic subject matter areas to cover, each office had their own strategic areas of emphasis,” she stated. “For some offices, it was about diversifying the volunteer board. In others it was managing millennials. For still others it was more effective recruitment of people of color. By adapting the curriculum based on the context within which each office works, you can help that office develop a vision and give them practical tools to help. But you can’t apply one approach to all offices.”
Speckart understands her organization’s genesis and tells the story clearly and concisely to assist her in her mission and help her to spread the passion. She is good at illustrating how TPL carries out its vision by sharing examples. “The Trust for Public Land came about when a couple of people were fighting the building of a large housing complex across from the Golden Gate Bridge. The people who won realized there was no organization that was exclusively fighting battles for land for people, for hiking, biking, parks and that sort of thing. Since no one was dedicated to that niche, they started our organization,” she stated.

“When we buy land from a private land owner, the vast majority of the time the goal is to make it accessible to the public. We don’t buy land just to buy land; it must benefit people. There are a lot of very interesting projects we have been part of. We helped protect Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birth site from being turned into a condo. Now it is a national park.”

Speckart said, “We do all sorts of work across the country with a focus on parks and playgrounds in cities, to make them more livable. In Chicago, we are working on the Bloomingdale Trail that will connect parks across the cities. Rahm Emanuel brought us in to help with that.

“We have done amazing work in New York City where we have taken school playgrounds and converted them into spaces that work for the rest of the community too,” Speckart stated. “This

In January of this year, the city of Chicago bought the Canadian Pacific Railway spur, known as the Bloomingdale Trail, for a sales price of $1 (not including administrative fees), according to the Digital Broadcast Center: WDBJ Television. WDBJ stated, “Now that almost all of the land for the trail is under City Hall control, the project’s manager, The Trust for Public Land, plans to unveil final design drawings. . . . Additional corporate support and a grass-roots fundraising campaign are scheduled to be announced in the spring, and construction will begin this summer.” More information can be found at www.bloomingdaletrail.org.
maximizes the use of parks and playgrounds in a city where open land is limited. We use a participatory community design process. We will do tremendous due diligence to involve the community before we build a park. We include students, school staff members, parents and neighbors.

“One of my favorite examples is a bench in one park that is two levels. It is placed in a specific position in the park so that girls can braid each other’s hair while they watch everything that is going on in the park! That kind of design took more input than a landscape artist provides — it relied on the children,” Speckart said.

According to Speckart, TPL incorporates all the stakeholders, including children, in their projects. TPL is serious about play. Their work is dedicated to the recreation and sustenance people get from a healthy relationship with their environment. This goes beyond building parks to providing opportunities for fitness to those who might not otherwise have access.

Speckart said, “We are putting in a lot of gym-grade fitness equipment in local parks so you don’t have to rely on access to a gym to get a full workout. This has been helpful to seniors, folks with disabilities, and other people who could not afford a gym.”

TPL is involved in a wide variety of activities to achieve their mission, and Speckart supports them all. She must understand all the necessary roles that contribute to making TPL an effective organization.

“There is a lot of great work we are doing on the ground,” Speckart stated. “We have staff members who do research on best practices and the economic value of our actions. The organization has a nice holistic view of preserving land and making it accessible to people. We cover the range from working with communities on how they want their cities to look, to helping to write ballot measures, to making the case with corporations and government, to fundraising, to project management.”

Speckart’s passion is finding the right people for the right job for an organization she cares deeply about. Whether she is looking for an accountant, a lawyer, a project manager, an intern or a community outreach expert, she is dedicated to locating people who connect to the mission of the TPL. I asked her how many people she has hired since she came on board. She guessed she had hired about a hundred for an organization that has 330 staff members. “I walk around the office and have pride of ownership because I see all these great people doing important work, and I know that I played a part in it.”

Find out all about the Trust for Public Land at www.tpl.org.