

Project Harmony's Falke: Leadership, relationships key to managing growth

by Dwain Hebda

Patrick Falke's career started about as far from the nonprofit world as one could get, working in the financial sector right out of college. But a nudge from his family steered him to volunteer with Project Harmony, and little by little he became convinced his professional life needed greater purpose.

"(Nonprofit work) wasn't something I thought I would get into, but I'm happy I did," he said. "The mission, I think, resonates with a lot of people. That obviously drew me in, like it does most people who've helped us build what we're building.

"After leaving college and working for a couple other businesses, I started to realize that my interest wasn't specifically what I was doing in finance or project management, but more organization building. I just had a good feeling (Project Harmony) was a good place to work and grow as a professional, and also be part of the development of what's now a larger organization that's having an even greater (community) impact than it had at the time."

When Falke arrived at Project Harmony seven years ago, there were 20 employees; today the staff has almost quadrupled. In the five years since he's been in the role of senior director of operations, the nonprofit organization has grown into one of the largest child advocacy centers in the country, serving more than 5,000 children and families every year.

Project Harmony provides medical services, forensic evaluations, case coordination, training and advocacy to child abuse victims and their non-offending family members. With its growth has come the ability to branch into other areas of need.

"The last couple of years, we've expanded our ability to provide mental health services," Falke said. "We have a Connections Program that works with local school districts to link families in need of mental health services as well as do some of our own internal mental health therapy services for the children we see.

Falke has played an instrumental role in Project Harmony's growth by effectively stewarding human and capital resources. In a field notorious for personnel burnout, Project Harmony enjoys an employee retention rate of 98 percent. Falke attributes this to the work

that's done daily to help support employees and the productive relationships Project Harmony enjoys with supporting agencies.

It's a process, he said, based squarely on buy-in and accountability from the top down.

"We always feel when it comes to professional development and staff development, it has to start with leaders (who) exemplify and model what we're wanting to do throughout the agency," Falke said. "We've done a lot of little specific things; the last couple of years we've been involved in the best places to work survey, which gets us some great information. We hired a project manager a year and a half ago who's helped us develop a professional development program."

Falke takes the same strategic approach with donors, illustrating in concrete terms how their monetary contributions are turned into tangible benefits within the community.

"All (donors) want to ensure that their contributions are working toward better outcomes for the vulnerable populations that they're trying to serve or help," he said. "What we've done, something that we're proud of as an organization, is develop really deep relationships

with some of our biggest supporters and we've done that to keep them involved as we grow as an organization.

"We do evaluate the wants and needs of the donor base, but we feel like if we put our best foot forward and continue to illustrate our work to potential supporters or current supporters, that (contributions) tend to just build on itself."

Editor's Note: This is one of a series of profiles featuring Midlands Business Journal 40 Under 40 award winners — entrepreneurs, business owners, managers and professional men and women under 40 years of age. The 2017 awards were co-sponsored by Northwest Bank and the University of Nebraska at Omaha's College of Business Administration.

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