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Improving Non-Profit Organizations: Mon Ami

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CLP Term Project Winter 2013

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Introduction

All over America there are children who don't have the basic needs to get ahead in school, causing them to fall behind at an early age. In Rhode Island an organization called Mon Ami¹ wants to make sure all children who don't have the basic needs to get ahead stay on the right track from the start. Mon Ami is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1834. They believe that providing comprehensive and effective services to vulnerable young children is not only a moral obligation but also a prudent financial investment for society to make. This is one of the most important aspects of the organization; their beliefs are exactly what are needed to get the children of Rhode Island ahead and on the right track.

Most non-profit companies or organizations are created to address a social issue. The social issue that Mon Ami is trying to address is that children living in poverty need help to avoid falling behind their peers. Mon Ami has covered every aspect of how to prevent a child from falling behind due to the child's misfortune and have developed support programs in response. Mon Ami offers twenty different services that not only help the child but the parents as well. The Child Care Center program was designed to provide quality care and education for children from the ages of 3 to 5. The goals of the Child Care Center are to "foster a positive self-concept, develop social skills, promote language and physical development, encourage creative expression, and foster an awareness and respect for diverse cultures and values." The Head Start program is a comprehensive child and family development program that promotes school readiness in low-income preschool children. This service includes education, health, nutrition, social

¹ The name of the organization has been changed to Mon Ami for privacy reasons

services, and other child and family support services. Now, on the other hand, programs such as Dads Making a Difference and First Connections are mostly for parents. The Dads Making a Difference program is focused on the father or male role model in the child's life. The mission of the program is to provide resources that helps ensure that fathers and significant men involved in the life of a child are having positive impacts on their children's lives. The First Connections program is free and offers confidential home visits. During these home visits, trained nurses, social workers, and community health workers meet with families in their homes to talk about their needs, answer questions they might have, and conduct assessments on the parents. These services focus more on the parents, allowing Mon Ami to impact the entire family, making the family stronger and their bond tighter. This is a very beneficial way to address the social issue of undereducated families and children.

Social Issue

Mon Ami's main focus involves helping families under the poverty line. The organization understands that families living in poverty need help staying strong and keeping their children on the right track and away from negative influences. The services and programs that Mon Ami offers are designed for families under the poverty line and children in desperate need of assistance.

Rhode Island has the highest poverty rate in the New England area. Approximately 6.8% of Rhode Island households are living in deep poverty, meaning a household would make almost \$9,601 annually for a family of three (Poverty in Rhode Island). Astonishingly enough, with Rhode Island being the smallest state in the United States, it has the highest unemployment rate of all states. As of December 2012, Rhode

Island has the highest unemployment rate within the United States at a rate of 10.2% (Unemployment Rates for States). Another major issue is the lack of health insurance in households. In Rhode Island, 13.6% of the population is uninsured (Health Insurance in Rhode Island, 2011). With Mon Ami making services available to families in need, it helps the parents develop their communication skills and commends their children to advance further in education.

Background of Organization

Mon Ami opened in 1834. It is a non-profit organization that works with children under the poverty line. Children living in poverty require assistance from services such as Mon Ami. Mon Ami also supports the parents that struggle to take care of their children, creating a safe and nurturing environment for children during the crucial early years of the children's lives. The mission statement for the non-profit organization is: "Mon Ami is the innovative leader in improving the well-being and healthy development of Rhode Island's most vulnerable young children. We accomplish this by providing flexible, effective, and culturally-relevant services, and advocating for programs and policies that support and strengthen these children and their families."

The organization works for a good cause and also works towards the goal of creating a safe and nurturing environment for underprivileged children. Mon Ami wants to ensure that children do not go hungry or unloved. Mon Ami is also involved in a lot of fundraising events and has sponsors such as Panera Bread and CVS (*Mon Ami*). In the beginning of 2013, the organization even held a coat drive for children who did not have winter jackets and gave away lightly used or new children's coats.

Team Experience

Our team experience was a great learning experience. This firsthand experience involved non-profits and social relationships. The children were able to look up to us as role models, and we were given the opportunity to share our knowledge with them. When we first entered the classrooms, all the children ran to us and were excited to have us there. Many of the children grew fond of us easily and constantly embraced us and wanted to play with us. It made us feel satisfied because we were unsure about how much attention they would normally get at home. Being seen as a role model or older brother gave us a great sense of satisfaction. Working with the teachers was also new to us because we have always been students under the teachers, and we were now being asked to be role models for the children. The teachers and the students were also fairly easy to get along with. Santos's and Dylan's teacher in Classroom 1 was very kind and obviously satisfied with her classroom. In Classroom 2, Kevin's and Bobby's teacher was just as kind, but the two teacher's aides were constantly complaining about their problems with their jobs. Kevin and Bobby noticed this the first day that they began community service.

Mon Ami is set up like a preschool and has multiple classrooms on every floor. There is one head teacher in every room, often accompanied by one or two aides. There are also small cots with blankets and pillows for the children to nap. The teachers all follow a set curriculum of activities every day. From 8:30 A.M. to 9:00 A.M., the children have breakfast and then from 9:00 A.M. to 9:30 A.M. the children would sing songs and read. The children are often taken outside to the fenced yard next to the facility when the weather is reasonably nice. There is a foam mat under the playground to minimize any injuries if one of the children falls, and on the first day on our site, many

children fell. Many toys such as baseballs, basketballs and plastic baseball bats were supplied by the organization and were kept inside a locked container.

Inside the classroom the teachers involve the children in fun learning activities which involve singing songs, playing instruments and using computers that have games that help enhance the children's learning skills. In every classroom, the capacity of children differs. The number of children varies from approximately 13 to 17 children. The children are fed breakfast and lunch every day and are taken care of until their parents arrive to pick them up. The classrooms were also well organized and everything was labeled in both Spanish and English. There were smoke detectors and sprinklers in case of a fire. There was also a sink in the classroom and hand sanitizer dispensers. However, we found one thing in particular to be bizarre; one bathroom would connect two classrooms. The bathrooms were used by each class and had no doors, only a curtain separating the two rooms. Throughout our time in the classrooms, we were able to smell the cleaning products used in the bathroom from where we sat.

Three Main Problems

1. Teacher's Attitudes

On the first day of attending Mon Ami care center, we were able to notice the teacher's attitude towards her children. Bobby and Kevin participated in Classroom 2 and noticed that the teacher and her aides let the children roam freely and without punishment when the children started to be reckless. When Bobby and Kevin were building blocks with several children, the teacher and her assistant immediately fled to the corner of the classroom to complain about their personal lives and their jobs. This serves as a serious problem because the quality of the organization's services depends solely on the

employees. If the teachers are unmotivated and uninterested in the organization's goal, they will grow to despise their work, and it will ultimately have an effect on the children.

2. Infrastructure

The second major problem within the organization was the infrastructure and equipment. Throughout our time inside the organization's building, we want to make sure that the layout of the facility is organized and properly maintained for the children's safety. Based on our discussion with the teachers, we know that the facility is extremely old and has not been frequently updated in terms of technology. The failure to update Mon Ami's infrastructure enhances the possibility of the threat of a lawsuit against the organization. For example, because the fences in the playground were too short, an adult can easily trespass into the yard and put the children in danger. Having the children and staff protected inside the building should be one of the organization's priorities also. The facility lacks the necessary precautions to prevent someone from entering the building. Windows are well protected by iron bars; however, the front entrance has no lock or buzzer to restrain a person from entering.

Another issue with the infrastructure is that certain classrooms tend to be larger and wider than others. With this in mind, Classroom 1 was smaller compared to Classroom 2. Classroom 2 had plenty of space for the children to roam and play in. We perceived this to be a disadvantage to the children Dylan and Santos were with, in Classroom 1, because they do not have enough space to play in. Moreover, it is also unfair to have most of the children in a larger room and the remaining in a smaller room because that puts the teachers in a more difficult position when dealing with more

children. The Mon Ami organization should not only treat their children fairly but give them the same opportunities and attention.

3. Communication

Lastly, the Mon Ami Care Center fails to answer phone calls or e-mails. It was very difficult to communicate effectively with the supervisors of the organization because they were often absent or busy. Throughout the process of beginning our community service, we had been very patient with the Mon Ami Care Center. We were not able to begin our community service until we had contacted the supervisors, but the constant failure of the organization to contact us back made it incredibly difficult. At one point, when we contacted the organization and clearly left our contact information, they contacted our professor claiming that we did not leave any contact information for them. Failure to properly communicate is unacceptable because there are many people and possibly other organizations trying to contact Mon Ami to use their services or provide their own means of help to the organization. During our time with the organization, our group also came to the realization that the executives fail to disaggregate information to lower level employees such as teachers. Even the teachers' superiors fail to inform the teachers about events involving their children. The teacher in Classroom 1 clearly stated to our group that she was often misinformed or not given any hint at all on any of the events or visits being done by other organizations. Mon Ami has yet to realize that communication is the key to any organization's success.

Solutions

1. Teacher's Attitudes

Some teachers in the Mon Ami organization definitely need to be more patient with their children because it shows that they cannot nurture children properly. After noticing that some teachers and their aides were dissatisfied with their jobs, our group determined that this behavior was likely caused by the lack of communication between the teachers and supervisors. If employees don't share their concerns with their supervisors, it often means that those employees don't feel comfortable with the organization, their superiors, or the goal of the organization. Several ways to eliminate distress in employees and get them to share their opinions are to create stronger interpersonal relationships between employees and superiors and also make the teachers feel that they are involved in the organization by sharing executive information. Teachers are the driving forces of the organization, and only by building trust with their superiors will they share the same goal as the organization (Abosag 65). With stronger interpersonal relationships, the teachers will not fear sharing their opinions with their superiors, whom they will see as peers rather than supervisors. Sharing executive information creates an understanding between the teachers and their superiors that all employees in the organization are important to the strategic plan and goals.

2. Infrastructure

We concluded that Mon Ami should offer an environment that is near impervious to anything that may be of danger to the children and also create a fair atmosphere. When children are taken to the Mon Ami facility, they are most likely placed in a medium or large sized room with a moderate number of toys and equipment. We think each room should be equal in size and should have the priorities of the children in mind at all times. While attending the third week of service, the furnace burned out on the main

classrooms' floor and could no longer keep several rooms heated. For that reason, all children were sent home in the middle of the day because Mon Ami could not provide a warm classroom. One of the main issues is to update the infrastructure because it was obviously not beneficial to the organization and children. Whenever a child misses class, they fall behind due to the lack of several hours of schooling. During the children's recess, our team noticed the fences were relatively short. The fences should be high enough to prevent an adult from getting over. Several larger children also had the ability to climb over the fence.

3. Communication

As far as communication goes, the staff and executive board of the Mon Ami Center needs to consider staying in touch with people contacting them. The staff within Mon Ami that our group tried to contact failed to act professionally. They had failed to respond to phone calls and e-mails from our group. If that was how the organization handled our attempts to contact them, how does the organization usually handle businesses that want to contact them for partnerships or sponsorships? In order to improve communication, the managers must ensure that all employees are taking their jobs seriously. The most decisive move Mon Ami can make is to constantly disaggregate essential information throughout the organization. Many teachers feel left out of the organization's decision making and are often bewildered by the fact that the executives don't try to learn from the employees involved directly with the organization's services. Teachers are ultimately the only employees interacting with the organization's target customers.

Recommendations

All successful organizations understand the need to constantly improve and adapt to changing environments. With that being said, there are several recommendations our team is eager to bring attention to the superiors of Mon Ami.

Mon Ami has shown to have trouble mainly within the organization itself. The first thing an organization should do is to eliminate the weaknesses within the company, and in any organization, the employees are the most important. As mentioned, several teachers have shown that they were unmotivated and disliked their duties associated with being an educator. This is often caused by the lack of motivation in an employee. Within one classroom, the teacher was dissatisfied with her work and also with the children's behavior. Another teacher was satisfied with her classroom but unhappy with how little information had been shared with her by her employers. The organization leaders are responsible for their services, so it is their responsibility to disaggregate information down to employees. Just recently, Mon Ami received and distributed children's jackets to those in need. Our group had spoken to one of the teachers about the coat distribution and she had mentioned that her superiors had not informed her on the details of the coat donations.

To prevent teachers from feeling dissatisfied with their jobs, their superiors first need to be aware of these problems. However, it makes it more difficult because the teacher's aid will often refuse to tell her superior the difficulties they face. In the particular case of one teacher and her aid, both of them often complained about their work together, making it impossible for their superior to be able to recognize their discontent. The employers should be sure that their employees come to them immediately

about any problems. The manager and her employees should have a stronger interpersonal relationship by discussing the problems within the classrooms weekly. A weekly meeting can help the supervisor and her subordinates grow closer and help those subordinates express their true feelings.

The infrastructure within the organization is outdated and can be deemed unsafe in many cases. The Mon Ami building is old and can cause many problems. For example, in one visit to the Mon Ami, on arrival our group discovered that classes were cancelled because there was no heat going into the classrooms. This was due to the fact that the building was heated by two large furnaces and one of them had suddenly stopped working. Knowing that there are problems that involve the building, the organization needs to prioritize the situation. The furnaces should be updated or replaced with newer or more reliable equipment. Money may be a problem when replacing expensive equipment, but if an organization does not have a reliable building for its services, the organization will cease to exist. Mon Ami may be able to request support from businesses involved with contracting or infrastructure. Asking for help from other businesses will show that the organization has the intention to improve constantly and also benefits the partnered businesses that agree. Mon Ami will be able to update their infrastructure and equipment while the partnered business will be known for its support of a non-profit. It is also a possibility for Mon Ami to become a partner with Johnson & Wales University. Johnson & Wales University offers many connections that may be of help to Mon Ami, such as Taco HVAC, which is a profitable business and has experimented with radiant floor heating which can be a solution to Mon Ami's heating problem.

Lastly, Mon Ami must be able to spread its information down from the executives to lower level employees. During a coat drive where an organization was giving out coats to the children, a teacher spoke up to our group about not being informed about the event. The teacher was aggravated because the donating organization selected students they believed needed the coats the most based on the child's appearance. This teacher in particular felt very strongly about not being involved in the event. She argued that she should have been involved because she knew the children the best. She was also dissatisfied with how unfair the organization donated the coats due to their bias in selection. All information involving the organization and more importantly, the teachers, should be disaggregated from the executives to the subordinates. The organization is in need of managers who are interested in maintaining relationships with their employees and also have the organization's well being in mind (Abosag 66). If the lower level employees are well informed, they will be more appreciative of the executives and organization and acknowledge that they are considered to be invaluable employees by the organization. The use of total quality management is needed for the organization to thrive in the field of business. By constantly improving every aspect of the organization, Mon Ami will be able to succeed tremendously and gain more recognition.

S.W.O.T. Analysis

- **Strengths**

The strengths of the Mon Ami come from being the leading child welfare and family services provider. Having a culture of doing good things for the community and decades of experience is an important factor to maintaining the organization for such a long time. The organization also has a large facility with many classrooms and proper

equipment. Having a facility with as much space as Mon Ami allows for a large capacity of 153 individuals (Mon Ami & Service-Cianci). Being in Rhode Island for so long, Mon Ami has also gained many supporters from organizations within the New England area that have recognized Mon Ami's work. Even local businesses such as Anton's Cleaners from Massachusetts donate to the cause of Mon Ami (GoLocalProv Features Team).

- **Weaknesses**

Mon Ami also has many weaknesses, many of them comes from the culture of the organization. As stated before, several problems involve the organization's infrastructure and the deteriorating building and equipment. The lack of communication is also a very significant weakness. Without communication throughout the organization from the executives to lower level employees, the managers will fail to understand the weaknesses of their organization. Another weakness is the failure to be able to monitor teachers efficiently. It is difficult to oversee the work being done because Mon Ami lacks working cameras within the building. Without being able to effectively record the teachers and their difficulties, the organization is unsure of what is actually happening in classrooms.

- **Opportunities**

Many opportunities for sponsors and more supporters are available for Mon Ami if the organization is able to connect to those outside of Rhode Island or even outside of the New England area. Many businesses in the New England area have already recognized Mon Ami for their work, but there are still many other businesses that have not. However, much of Mon Ami's work is focused on saving children from poverty or abusive relationships, and reportedly, Rhode Island already had 47,127 children living in

poverty in 2011 (Borg). Although tragic, it is an opportunity for Mon Ami to do what is possible for the children of Providence, and one day, hopefully all of Rhode Island.

- **Threats**

Of the many threats an organization such as Mon Ami may face, the primary threat is the failure of the businesses within Rhode Island to recognize Mon Ami and supply the organization with the resources that are needed to fund and support a non-profit organization. If Mon Ami cannot be recognized by the businesses within the New England area, the organization will have a lot of trouble managing its limited supply of resource and capital. With the aged building and equipment, Mon Ami will eventually find it absolutely necessary to renovate the infrastructure as well as replace the equipment.

The biggest threat for a non-profit organization is definitely the failure of the organization to create awareness about the cause and mission. When parents are seeking help and are unaware of organizations such as Mon Ami, how will they be able to find these organizations when there is little advertising being done? Creating awareness about Mon Ami and its services is the first step to creating an organization that can make an incredible change in the community today.

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