

Executive Summary

People are at the heart of everything One Acre Fund does. Hiring, retaining, and developing staff is our most important calling as an organization, because having adequate people resources is a crucial factor for growth and impact. We do not think it is a stretch to say that people make or break our business. We operate around a philosophy of *hire, retain, and develop*, which guides everything we do for our staff:

- *Hire:* We try to go beyond interviews and think about the hiring process as an extension of our work.
- *Retain:* We think that retention boils down to paying staff fairly, providing ample development opportunities, and cultivating a sense of meaning in work.
- *Develop:* We are a “family of leaders” and want to develop that family almost entirely from within.

Field staff (who are primarily country nationals) form the bedrock of our organization. They make up roughly 80% of our total staff, and they are the ones who interact with farmers on a daily basis.

Given their size and importance to One Acre Fund’s ability to grow, field staff are the focus of much of our professional development efforts. We utilize continuous on-the-job feedback through key performance indicators, weekly check-ins, and regular performance reviews to help our field staff identify and work on development priorities. We have created specific professional development curricula for each field staff level so that staff can develop the professional skills required for promotion. The overall goal of these efforts is to create a deep bench of middle-management talent to help fuel our growth as we aim to serve one million farm families by 2020.

The Importance of People

Of every potential constraint to success that One Acre Fund faces as an organization, people are by far the most important. Having high-quality staff, in abundant numbers, allows us to do everything else that matters—from executing our key day-to-day functions, to seizing on new opportunities, to advocating on behalf of our farmers. The success of our people is a precursor to everything we do, and therefore is our highest priority as an organization.

One Acre Fund operates on a principle of *hire, retain, develop*. These three priorities anchor our approach to people and help us clarify new initiatives:

- *Hire:* We attempt to think about hiring systematically. Our field staff interviews are experiential, simulating the actual job being recruited for as much as possible and allowing us to see how candidates would act as One Acre Fund staff members. We often over hire, allowing for the first few months of the job to form an additional testing phase that lets us get to know candidates even better. This practice also allows for unforeseen growth.

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- *Retain:* We think retention comes from fair pay, ample development opportunities, and a sense of meaning in work. Meaning comes from giving each staff member a sense of *ownership* over his or her work. This is combined with a sense of *service* to their community and other communities. Together, these factors drive long-term retention.
- *Develop:* Most importantly, both for our success and for the fulfillment of our staff, is providing ample professional development opportunities for all staff. For our field staff, we aim to promote from within, and there is no “career ceiling.” We devote formal and informal resources to the professional growth of field staff all the way from field officer (serving 150 farmers) to senior field director (serving 10,000 farmers) and beyond. One Acre Fund views itself as a “family of leaders” and therefore has a responsibility to provide the tools and resources to make that vision a reality.

Development of Field Staff

One Acre Fund’s network of field staff form the bedrock of our organization. Of our 2,100-plus staff, roughly 95% are country nationals, and the majority of that group are field staff who interact with our farmers on a daily basis. The remainder work in support functions like logistics, M&E, innovations, finance, bookkeeping, and customer service.

Given these numbers, the field staff group is the key group whose long-term professional development will put us on a trajectory to serve hundreds of thousands of clients. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of One Acre Fund’s field staff:

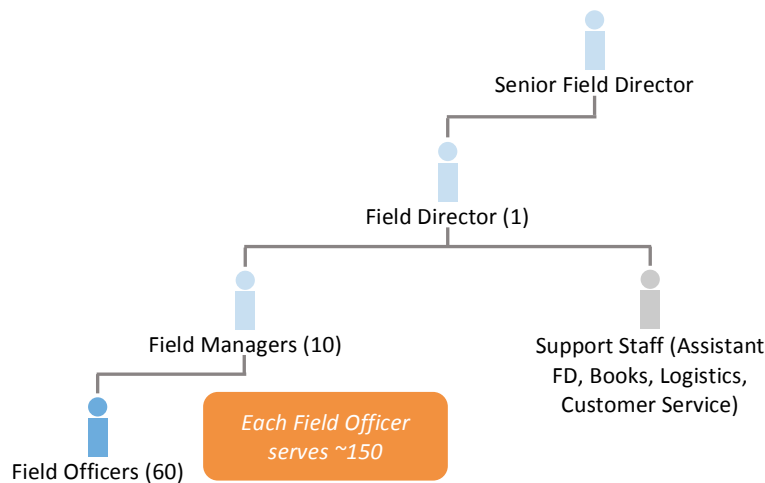


Figure 1: One Acre Fund's local staff structure.

Each One Acre Fund field “operating unit” (corresponding to the staff that serve under one field director) is capable of serving roughly 10,000 clients. We have a long-term goal of increasing the number of farmers each field officer serves (see the companion white paper on “Scale Innovations” for more information). But in the meantime, every new group of 10,000 farmers that One Acre Fund

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Our growth will require the addition of approximately 80 staff, some at the field level, some in field management, and some in headquarters support. This is a massive recruiting and professional development undertaking.

Our growth means that many of the staff who are currently at the associate level will be moving to the manager level, while managers become directors, and so on. This provides nearly unlimited promotion potential for staff, as well as a formidable professional development challenge for One Acre Fund.

Our overarching goal is to build and train a large and flexible army of middle and upper managers who can help us expand into new geographies, innovate and test impactful new products, and, most importantly, execute day-to-day in direct service to farmers. The remainder of this paper discusses the key components of our professional development of field staff.

One Acre Fund's Field Staff Development Toolkit

One Acre Fund believes strongly in seeking talented candidates with high potential and then developing that potential by giving them the tools to succeed. While a few of our field positions require advanced skills or university degrees, many simply require hard work, intelligence, and professionalism. We invest in staff so that they can turn their raw potential into professional success.

Hire

One Acre Fund puts each and every field officer we hire through an intensive experiential interview process that mimics the actual field officer job as much as possible. Each field officer hiring pool starts with several hundred applicants for a group of field officer hires that will eventually number several dozen.

We begin with a simple aptitude test, but quickly move on to group interviews (groups of seven to ten) that are intended to filter out candidates who are either too aggressive or too passive for the field officer position. Candidates who make it this far return for a second day that largely copies the field officer job. Candidates provide a mock field training to One Acre Fund staff, measure land, organize meetings or engage in targeted mobilization in their communities, or visit as many farmers as possible within a day to tell them about One Acre Fund. Those candidates who can make it through these tasks likely have the service mindset and intelligence required for a job on our field staff.

Retain

We believe retention boils down to paying fairly, providing ample career development opportunities and upward mobility, and cultivating a sense of meaning in work. We believe a sense of meaning comes from three things: fair pay, ownership, and service.

Fair Pay

One Acre Fund believes in paying our staff fairly. To accomplish this, we routinely benchmark the salaries of our field staff against comparable organizations and comparable jobs to ensure we are in the correct ballpark. These benchmarking exercises serve as the basis of our salary guidelines and are communicated transparently to our field staff so that they understand

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where One Acre Fund fits in the local labor market. Beyond that, we give raises based on performance and based on the upward trajectory shown in Figure 1.

Ownership

Each field officer is running a “mini-franchise” of One Acre Fund in his or her community. They are responsible for recruiting new clients, ensuring One Acre Fund delivers the correct types and quantities of farm inputs to farmers, training farmers on agricultural best practices, providing top-notch customer support, and ensuring accurate and transparent repayment. In this sense, they fulfill many of the crucial business functions of a small NGO, with overall logistical support taken care of by the umbrella organization. When a field officer is promoted to a field manager, the overall purpose remains the same, but on an expanded scale. We believe this structure provides ownership, and therefore long-term meaning, to the work of our field staff.

Service

Our field officers have a large degree of influence over the success and prosperity of the communities they serve. Our field staff believe in giving back to the communities where they grew up and live (the vast majority of our field staff work among their neighbors). One Acre Fund’s field officers can make a real difference in the livelihoods of their neighbors with high-quality service, and this gives their work a sense of meaning.

Develop

One Acre Fund believes that most professional development happens “on the job,” in the form of routine but meaningful feedback, mentorship, and working through progressively difficult professional challenges. We rely on internal promotions for nearly all field staff roles and make sure that feedback is consistently tailored to preparing staff for promotion.

The most frequent promotion step our field staff undergo is from field officer to field manager. We have created on-the-job and more formal, classroom-style materials and tools to ensure that we prepare field officers for this jump. Our commitment to promoting from within means that we cannot succeed unless a high percentage of each field staff level is made ready for promotion on a rapid time frame. The remainder of this section discusses some of the tools we use to ensure that this can happen.

Field Staff “Fast Track”

In order to develop an army of star leaders who can support One Acre Fund’s expansion, we have developed a “fast track” course that attempts to accelerate the development of high-performing field officers into field managers. Whereas field staff traditionally take between 12 and 24 months to reach promotion, the fast track course aims to promote top performers in as little as six months. This course supplements our standard on-the-job feedback and development mentorship with a structured set of trainings on topics like technical skills, leading effective trainings, public speaking, creative problem solving, and leadership. Topics are covered in a classroom setting, which involves a mix of interactive exercises and role-playing.

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Participants receive grades on assignments and an exit exam. By the end of the fast track course, we have found that top performers are ready for promotion within roughly six months.

We have a parallel fast track course for promising field managers, so that they may have the opportunity to rapidly develop into field directors. As One Acre Fund expands geographically, we are increasingly making use of high-performing field directors and field managers as “seed” staff in new locations. This policy is only feasible with a highly efficient program of training that churns out a deep bench of management talent.

New Leader Training

As our field operations grow in scale and complexity, we rely on highly sophisticated support managers in areas like logistics, procurement, M&E, finance, and customer service. Similar to our field staff fast track program, we recognize a need for these staff to receive formal professional development opportunities as they evolve into managers.

Although the goal of the new leader training program is equivalent to that of the fast track program, the curriculum is tailored to the particular needs of administrative staff. As such, it focuses on broader professional skills like work planning, effective delegation, and communication, as well as technical skills like data auditing and use of enterprise software.

Key Performance Indicators

It may sound obvious, but one of the best ways to help staff develop is to create key performance indicators (KPIs) that help them understand their work and what the organization expects of them. At each level of our field staff, we make ample use of weekly KPIs to help staff prioritize and focus on execution.

Each of our weekly field staff meetings begins with a review of the indicators that are most relevant to the activities being conducted in the field that week. For example, during farmer enrollment, field staff have ample time to review the number of new farmers enrolled during the previous week, and to compare their performance against that of their peers. This use of a simple enrollment KPI helps field officers push themselves to excel.

With our framework of *hire, retain, and develop*, we will train high-capacity leaders committed to a shared vision of serving one million farm families by 2020.

Key Conclusions

- ▶ People are critical—they are at the heart of everything One Acre Fund does as an organization. Developing people is our organization’s most important calling. We operate on a principle of *hire, retain, develop*, and try to embed that philosophy into all of our people operations.
- ▶ The biggest constraint on growth for One Acre Fund (and for most social enterprises, presumably) is having adequate staffing, both in terms of quality and quantity, to take advantage of new opportunities and support growth.
- ▶ We believe that most learning happens “on the job.” Frequent, regular feedback and mentorship from managers, combined with iteration on key deliverables, provides the best opportunities for development.
- ▶ On-the-job learning has to be supplemented with more formal classroom-style development opportunities, especially for organizations with a commitment to promoting from within.