

Consultant got \$3,600 to teach St. Pete housing CEO to be nicer, stop screaming at staff

In 2017 the consultant coached St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love on how to treat staff better. But the complaints haven't stopped.

Tampa Bay Times | Published 4/10/19 | By Christopher O'Donnell, codonnell@tampabay.com, (813) 226-3446

St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love had a simple explanation for claims made by some of his senior staffers that he belittled and shouted at them.

"I have a heavy voice," Love told a *Tampa Bay Times* reporter in February. He said complaints about his management style could be the result of employees struggling to deal with a new CEO.

But records show that in 2017, the authority was so concerned about that management style that it paid a consultant \$3,650 to address Love's failings as a boss.

In a five-hour meeting with the consultant, Love acknowledged he "screamed" at staffers and on one occasion made them do non-agency work for him. Among the recommendations made by the consultant was that Love stop criticizing employees in front of others and refrain from making friends with the owners of outside firms paid to work for the agency.

The consultant's efforts may have been in vain: Four days after Love spoke to the *Times*, another top authority worker filed a formal grievance complaining that the CEO bullied, intimidated and degraded her.

"Mr. Love has consistently verbally abused, harassed and degraded me and other senior staff members, especially female staff members, through one-way interrogations, baseless chastising, insults and bullying," read the complaint from Robin Adams, the authority's asset management officer. Her complaint states that she has been receiving counseling to deal with the "extreme stress" and anxiety caused by Love, who is paid \$157,000 annually to run the agency.

The complaint is another sign of turmoil in the authority's highest echelons. St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman recently announced he will remove three of the authority's governing board members for failing to adequately oversee the agency and its CEO. He cited the same reason for recently declining to reappoint two other board members.

Among his concerns is that the board approved a 7 percent pay raise for Love even though some board members had not seen his evaluation. The housing agency was also cited by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development because Love lived rent-free for nine months in an apartment designated for low-income families. He also approved using agency funds to furnish the apartment and to pay his electric bills.

Adams filed her grievance after a Feb. 14 meeting with the CEO and other employees to discuss unpaid rents in properties the authority owns. During the meeting, she said, Love belittled, berated and talked over her. The same behavior has been "ongoing and continuous since he was hired in January 2016," her complaint said.

"This was a 'last straw' incident for me," wrote Adams, who joined the authority in 2009. She stated that she wanted a written apology and a commitment from Love to improve the way he treats her and other staffers.

Authority spokeswoman Michelle Ligon said Tuesday that the consultant was hired in 2017 as a "coaching exercise" to come up with ways to encourage staff to be more receptive to new ideas.

"The effectiveness of team building, through consensus, is challenging but not impossible," she said, "as shown by virtue of the compelling fact that in a very short period of time, the agency has transitioned in management, operations, and industry matters."

But the consultant's report only addresses the behavioral issues raised by Love's employees.



St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love seen during a February board meeting. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

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Adams' description of Love's behavior is consistent with the hostile work environment described by Rachel Gelbmann, who was let go about 12 days before the end of her three-month probationary period in November. Similar complaints were also made in 2017 by some senior agency employees who were asked to fill out anonymous questionnaires about their boss as part of his first evaluation 18 months after he was hired.

The authority told the *Times* that the questionnaires, which are public record, could not be found.

Two questionnaires obtained by the *Times* from former employees included complaints of low morale, bullying, and disrespect for women on staff.

Other concerns were about Love's judgment. On one occasion, he ordered three employees to spend more than three hours making "goody bags" for his upcoming fraternity golf event. He also appeared intoxicated at the 2016 St. Petersburg Grand Prix where the agency had a concession booth set up to raise funds, an employee wrote. Love was also taking beers that were intended to be sold, that complaint said.

Shortly after the questionnaires were completed, the authority hired Massachusetts housing consultant Leo Dauwer to work with Love. Dauwer, who runs Dower Associates, had previously conducted the authority's search to find a successor to former CEO Darrell Irions, who retired in 2015.

Dauwer was mailed copies of the questionnaires and held a face-to-face meeting with Love in August 2017.

In his five-page report of the meeting, Dauwer praised Love for his willingness to listen to criticism and to use it as a "learnable moment."

The report includes responses from Love to some of the accusations made in the staff questionnaires. Love stated that he only ordered staff to do work to benefit his fraternity just once. He disputed Dauwer's comment that he needed to "refrain from giving the image he has consumed too much alcohol at social functions or at any time when such drinking may impact his judgment or behavior while at work."

"This is the only time I was near staff with any alcohol," Love wrote of the 2016 Grand Prix complaint. "This comment was embellished to be more than what happened. I'm a fish in a fish bowl in this instance."

Dauwer, 90, said he was aware that Love had some issues at his previous job as executive director of the Inkster Housing Commission in Michigan. But he said the St. Petersburg housing agency had wanted a CEO who could not only administer housing but also put together financing for development of new affordable and low-income housing.

"Could he handle people a little better? I suppose so, but he was introducing change that not everybody thought was a good idea," Dauwer told the *Times*.