



Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It

The future is coming. Are you ready?

By Robin Lynn Grinnell

This is a beautiful time to be nonprofit, an exciting time to be a nonprofit leader, and a frustrating time to be a “nonprofit leader of the future.” At least, that’s what I hear.

For the past decade or so, I’ve been working in the area of nonprofit leadership. Ranging from volunteer centers to national service programs to structured leadership “institutes,” there’s great discussion on what it means to be a leader: How do we prepare members of The Next Generation, and how do we keep them?

In my work with the Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), I’ve had the opportunity to coordinate our Emerging Leaders program. This program is one example of work being done all over the country to cultivate and engage young professionals in shaping our sector’s future. Several states and regions

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have their own leadership programs. The AIM Alliance hosted the NP2020 Open Space Forum in July (www.gvsu.edu/np2020), and American Humanics has taken the lead on establishing a Nonprofit Sector Workforce Coalition (www.humanics.org). As hundreds of thousands of baby boomers look toward retirement, we want to feel assured that our good work will carry on.

In theory the conversation is great, but there’s a problem. A

couple of problems. First, we tend to talk amongst ourselves, guessing what they (those young pups) want and value, and wondering when they’ll wise up and learn the way of our world. Second, most of our organizations are structured to meet old-school work styles and leadership systems. They’re like houses with old breaker boxes — they were fine in the old days, but you’ll blow a fuse if you plug in too many things. Technically, there’s electricity — but not enough for modern conveniences. Emerging leaders — fully embracing entrepreneurship, technology, innovation, and possibility — feel that the nonprofit machine needs to up the amps, add a few gigs, and deal with MySpace.

Let me assure you — this sentiment isn’t unique to Michigan. Over the past few years I’ve
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Four Questions about Nonprofit Work

Just to make sure she wasn't off her rocker, Robin did a quick e-mail survey of MNA's 117 Emerging Leaders program alumni. She asked four questions, and these are sound-bites of what she heard:

1. What's the best thing about working in the nonprofit sector?

- Working in the nonprofit sector is extremely rewarding because I know that at the same time I'm earning a living for myself I'm also taking action, on a daily basis, to improve the lives of others.

- Hands-down best thing: being able to sleep at night. To know that — while I may not always be able to accomplish everything I would like — I'm able to make strides (be they tiny or significant) towards a world I'm happier with. And I get to use my own talents to do it.

- Having come to the nonprofit sector later in my professional life, the most amazing thing I have discovered is the challenge, pride, reward, and relationships that have come from doing work I believe in. Having the potential to actually make a difference (as opposed to simply making a buck) has given me new vigor and energy toward my work.

- I like feeling as if my work is helping the greater community and not just making more money for someone. I also find nonprofit organizations tend to value the contributions of all staff, regardless of their position, more than for-profits. They're also more concerned with fairness when dealing with staff.

2. What's the biggest frustration about working in the nonprofit sector?

- Constantly "putting out fires." Not just on my own part, but as an entire sector. Many of us are driven by an overwhelming sense of urgency, but we let these urgent demands draw our focus away from the big picture. We plan (or express a desire to plan), only to turn around and say, "That's a nice idea, but it won't work in the real world."

- Budgets, funding, having much of the for-profit world think we have "easy jobs," and on occasion the perception that nonprofit salaries (specifically top management) are too high for being a donation/grant funded "community job."

- Lack of efficiency. Too often nonprofits spin their wheels and waste money because they don't have people with the right expertise.

- I'm a firm believer in leveraging resources — be they financial, human, or other. The best way to enable this is to co-learn from one another and find opportunities to collaborate and share. There is little time to carve out of busy schedules to allow this to happen.

3. What recommendations/insights do you have about how to attract and retain new talent?

- Realize and respond to the fact that not all people hold the same values on benefits such as flex time,

work from home, part time health care, tuition reimbursement. Many of these benefits are open to all with the nonprofit knowing that only a relatively small amount of their workforce will request or be interested in using them. So the bottom line cost is not prohibitive.

- It's important that young professionals know that nonprofit positions are "real jobs," not charity. Nonprofits need to make sure they're compensating their employees in a way that reflects that.

- From my perspective, the nonprofit sector's major "selling point" for attracting talented new people is the opportunity to channel their passions — whether it's a passion for the substantive areas (like housing, the arts, entrepreneurship, or spiritual well-being), or a love of the mechanics (nonprofits need accountants and IT professionals, too), the nonprofit sector has it all. Whatever you love, you can find it here.

- We need to highlight the ability to be flexible. Not just things like flex-time, creative benefits, etc. (although these are great), but the fact that opportunities for growth are common; innovative and "weird" ideas are often more likely to be encouraged than they would in a "bottom-line-focused" organization.

- A key component of attracting and retaining new talent is to provide high-quality degrees and professional certifications/training in the field. Getting students involved in a comprehensive way with nonprofits is another key to success. Offering internships, cultivating philanthropic thinking, and supporting leadership development should begin in the earliest grades possible.

- There needs to be a clear career path. If people don't think there's a future, they'll always be looking for the next opportunity. Most people in the nonprofit sector want a job that's worthwhile, with good benefits and job security, and they're willing to sacrifice salary to get it.

4. Are there organizations that do a really good job of listening to and learning from emerging leaders? Can you give an example?

- John O'Brien, executive director of Northwest Detroit Neighborhood Development (www.ndndhome.org), truly values the contributions of the young professionals he sees as the organization's future leaders. He nurtures his employees with training opportunities and asks for frequent feedback from employees regarding their career goals.

- Although not a "traditional" nonprofit, Echoing Green (www.echoinggreen.org) is centered around nurturing emerging leaders — and encouraging them to lead one another. By providing fellowships (including seed money, technical assistance, and opportunities to engage in peer learning), Echoing Green makes it possible for emerging leaders to succeed. ■



attended workshops and meetings on this topic nationally, conversations encouraged and hosted by Independent Sector, the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, and the National Council of Nonprofit Associations. Over and over I've heard young leaders express their frustration and disenchantment

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with The Establishment. "I tried working for Nonprofit X, but they couldn't get their heads around technology and how much it would help us move forward. I couldn't work there, wasting all that time and money, so I started a new nonprofit." "My supervisor was intimidated that I had a Master's degree and every time I suggested we try something new, she kept thinking I was trying to make her look bad. I got tired of it and I left."

At times, we seem like hypocrites. We work to enhance the quality of life for our customers yet sometimes we work our employees into the ground, asking them to

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sacrifice family and personal time for a greater good. Ask emergent leaders if they aspire toward being executive directors and often they'll say no. When asked why, they'll say, "I don't want to work 60, 70, 80 hours a week. It's not worth it."

Frances Hesselbein set the bar with her suggestion of "How to Be a Leader" (*The Leader of the Future*, Leader to Leader Institute, www.leadertoleader.org). Rather than focusing on what you *do* as a leader, focus on what you *are*. Visionary. Ethical. Attendant. Honest. Humble. (Get the picture?) If we follow the lead of Hesselbein and so many other great thought leaders and human beings, we have no choice but to realize that the changing times require new leadership styles and different organizational structures. Our current way of doing (insert specific task) isn't the only way, may not be the right way, and probably isn't the best way.

All right, all right, enough already! I get it! But I have my board on my back, and getting them to move is like tapping a pine tree in December.

Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is this: Ask the questions, listen to the answers, and then advocate for change. How can

your organization better meet the needs of your staff, constituents, and community? How can you maximize the use of technology? How can you attract and retain new talent? How can you create meaningful career paths? How can you reward and recognize in the absence of six-figure salaries? Who, on your board or staff, can champion this thoughtful introspection and gently guide the impassioned core toward a new way of doing business?

This is where the work of NP2020 and the Nonprofit Sector Workforce will be so critical to our future as a sector. They're asking emergent leaders about their

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ideas, concerns, and passions — and they're making the information widely available. It's our job to listen, learn, and adapt. And that doesn't just mean that current executives need to change the way they work: Boards must be willing to grow, take risks, and reap the rewards. New leaders have new ideas, and they won't succumb to the pressure to conform. They don't have to. They'll simply find somewhere else to work.

They're speaking. Are you listening? ■

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