

Take Your Training into Your Hands

In the nonprofit sector, the career path for executives is nebulous and undefined. You need to chart your own course.

By Laura Gassner Otting

What does it mean to be a nonprofit executive? In a sector where there isn't a clear career path, it means driving your own future and taking responsibility for obtaining the leadership skills you need. Let's take a look at what those skills are.

What Skills Do You Need?

In "Daring to Lead," CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the Meyer Foundation describe how they surveyed nearly 2,000 nonprofit executives to determine the skills necessary for nonprofit leaders. Here's what they found.

Be a motivator. Few nonprofits have the luxury of using monetary rewards as incentives. Instead, nonprofit leaders must influence their employees in other ways. They must

Successful nonprofit leaders manage in all directions.

constantly connect daily outcomes to overarching goals, underscore the importance of personal contributions to team efforts, and encourage employees to keep working toward solutions to sometimes overwhelming problems. Achieving specific goals along the way helps them benchmark their successes.

Build your own professional brand using social media.

Manage up, down, and sideways. Successful nonprofit leaders manage in all directions—up to senior staff and board members, down to paid and volunteer workers, and sideways to constituents, funders, and other stakeholders. They focus on building teams, partnerships, and collaborations at all levels.

Delegate with kindness and empathy while demanding accountability. Nonprofit employees are there because they believe in the organization's mission. They need to feel that their contributions matter. They also want to work autonomously, taking responsibility for their part of the solution. Managers who delegate with this in mind will have the most productive staff.

Be adaptable and open. Encourage diversity of all sorts, not just of race, age, and creed but of perspectives, backgrounds, and styles. Become culturally competent, and create a culture that welcomes different viewpoints and fosters communication across all lines.

Know how to get to yes. Understanding how to ask for resources (from donor prospects, board members, and staff alike), embodying the organization's mission, and understanding human nature are keys to any nonprofit executive's success.

Manage dotted-line relationships. Whether it's a large donation, loaned

executives, or hosted office space, nonprofits must rely on the kindness of others to accomplish their missions. These stakeholder relationships are dotted, not straight lines. Keeping partners not only happy but deeply invested is a challenge that nonprofit executives must master. Simply put, it takes a village to run a nonprofit.

Produce impressive returns. The ability to deliver—and document—results when resources are short is invaluable. You must be able to withstand scrutiny with grace.

Maintain a long-term view. Being able to see the big picture and manage setbacks with renewed energy is a vital skill for a nonprofit leader.

Be passionate about the cause. Working in a nonprofit setting can be difficult. Some days it feels almost impossible. A passion for the work, belief in the mission, and intense respect for the people being served—along with the ability to inculcate those feelings in others—is what makes it all doable.

How Do You Develop Those Skills?

Take an honest look at the skills you have and those you need. Then consider these tips for developing a full range of leadership skills and a solid career path.

Develop yourself. Unfortunately, it's not typical for nonprofit organi-

You can become an expert by announcing yourself as one.

It takes a village to run a nonprofit.

zations to focus on skills training, successor grooming, or management development. While their counterparts in business are in management training programs, nonprofit employees are often left to fend for themselves. That's why you need to take an active role in your own professional development. Take advantage of continuing education. Seek out training opportunities, and build a case about why funds should be expended for training.

Be a connector. Find a mentor or two or three, and be a mentor to others. Take time to nurture your relationships. Building your own professional brand—using social media is the easiest way—quickly enables you to have a network and a web of influence and knowledge beyond what your financial resources or 9-to-5 persona allow. What people in the sector do you admire and con-

sider to be on the top of the latest trends? Develop your network and sphere of influence in a way that provides access to those people.

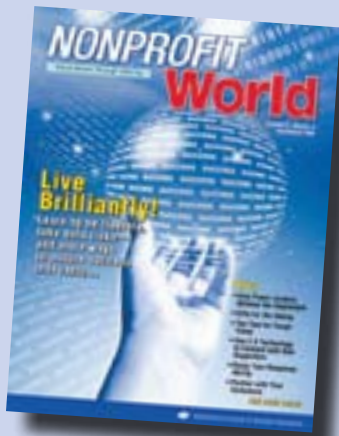
Get noticed. In a day when technology provides anyone with a bully pulpit, you're the master of your own career destiny. You can become an expert by announcing yourself as one and then backing it up with substance. The research and thinking you'll do to become an expert will be the best leadership training possible. ■

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