

# Bonnie Hunter: From Program Manager to Director of Talent and Innovation

To have Bonnie Hunter explain it, her path to becoming the [North York Community House \(NYCH\)](#) director of talent and innovation was “weird and winding.” Nearly 15 years ago, she joined NYCH as a program manager for the nonprofit focused on supporting a community of new immigrants and residents in northwest Toronto.

Shortly after she joined, NYCH’s Executive Director Shelley Zuckerman set out to find a finance and administrations person. Hunter told her, “It’s too bad you’re looking for someone in finance because I have a background in HR.” Zuckerman, coincidentally, hated HR but liked finance, so she agreed to give Hunter the HR role.

With her toe in the HR water, Hunter soon found herself immersed. As the organization grew, Hunter’s title changed, she jokingly estimates, around 18 times. Eventually, she says, “I became the manager of administration, then we became large enough to get funding for a director position and I became HR director.” A restructuring four years ago led to her current role as director of talent and innovation.

In this conversation with Bridgespan Principal Meera Chary, Hunter describes her role, how it benefits the organization, and the muscles she needs to flex to do it well.

## **Meera Chary: What inspired NYCH to create the director of talent and innovation role?**

**Bonnie Hunter:** The creation of the role stemmed from the need for a creative and strategic approach to talent in the organization. I had always been involved in strategic planning processes, so the idea of connecting that to talent and leadership, our most critical asset, made sense. Over time, the role has increasingly focused on organizational culture and innovative ways to cultivate and develop our talent.

**Meera: What are your main responsibilities?**

**Bonnie:** I still oversee the entire HR function. I have a coordinator who does a lot of the day-to-day tasks, which allows me to do strategic thinking and planning, like researching new recruitment strategies and really looking at diversity on a number of levels. We're really focused on this right now. Where are we missing people who represent our communities? How do we recruit them effectively?

We're looking at creative ways to interview and hire when a lot of candidates may speak English as their second language, or when there are particular aspects of their roles that don't surface well in a traditional Q&A format. We're also looking for unexpected pools of candidates to tap into.

Another focus is on the talent we already have. Some of the challenges we've been facing are around how we recognize and reward leadership of people who don't necessarily want to climb up the ladder, or for those who do want to advance but can't because there are limited opportunities. For example, how we might collaborate with organizations that have similar talent needs and create opportunities for growth and mobility across organizations.

**Meera: You mentioned that developing and retaining talent is a key part of your role. How have you approached doing this?**

**Bonnie:** As a team, we've gotten really clear on what skills and competencies are most important to NYCH, given our organizational culture and our strategic goals. Now we're thinking about how to map pathways for individuals to build those competencies over time. Would shadowing, mentoring, or some common opportunities help them build their skills and capacity, and help us to retain them? (NYCH did this work as a part of Bridgespan's [Investing in Future Leaders program](#).)

It can be frustrating when we lose really good people because we don't have an opportunity for them, so I'm always thinking about what would keep them. There have been people whom we've financially supported in continuing their educations. We've connected people to mentors in the field. And this might sound absurdly simple, but one of the things people really need more of these days is time. Leadership development opportunities are important, but we need to be really thoughtful about making space for people to do that work.

**Meera: Is there anything you've tried specifically that were either successes, or clear failures?**

**Bonnie:** One success has been bringing people onto board-level committees as a development and learning opportunity. Board work continues to be mysterious to a lot of folks, and I've found that people really enjoy having that interaction. It elevates people's idea of what they can expect from themselves and it doesn't require a ton of extra time, so it's not a workload burden.

One thing we tried a few years ago that wasn't as successful was an internal mentorship program. I tried pairing junior staff with more senior staff in a mutual learning context. While there were great experiences that came out of it for a short time, there just wasn't enough learning happening: we didn't do it in a way that was transformative.

**Meera: Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with Shelley, the ED?**

**Bonnie:** I'm absurdly fortunate in that over 15 years Shelley's given me so many opportunities to grow, and make mistakes. One thing Shelley does really well is leverage individual strengths. I'm somewhat unique in my role in that I have a social work background. It gives me a different level of understanding about the work we do and the perspective of our staff and managers.

Shelley has helped me take advantage of that. She's included me in opportunities whether they're directly related to my role or not, and she's been a great mentor and partner. We work together a lot around visioning, strategizing, problem solving.

**Meera: What skills and experience do you need to do your job well?**

**Bonnie:** Really understanding the organization seems to be critical. I think when organizations look to hire for this role they need to be really honest with themselves about their vision, and their strengths and weaknesses because a good talent and innovation officer will push things and challenge the status quo.

Of course foundational skills like risk management are important to have, but I feel like my main responsibility is creating a humane workplace. Innovation and leadership building are wonderful, but if you have a toxic workplace or a workplace in which people don't feel seen or valued, then it's meaningless.

**Meera: What has been your role in building a culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

**Bonnie:** Equity and inclusion are really important, especially to my role. We want to make sure our leadership is aligned and know what they're talking about, and understand what anti-oppression means and the importance of it, broadly and for our organization.

A big piece of this is making sure we don't assume we're right all of the time. We do this by reflecting, listening, and learning. To this end, my role is also being on the front line of learning and discovering new practices, so we can continually move towards those goals. I'm aware that the top two positions in our organization that largely serves communities of color are held by white, Canadian-born women. As a person with power and privilege, I need to step back and make room for others in conversation and decision making, and I need to make sure this type of change happens at all levels of the organization to ensure its significance over the long run.

**Meera: How do you see your role changing over the next three to five years?**

**Bonnie:** It's already changing. For example, I know I'm going to need to work on succession planning, so I will be working on that with Shelley and the board over the next year or two.

Also, our staff demographics—like age—are changing, workplace expectations are changing. I'm already spending significantly more time than I have in the past on health and wellness, and dealing with the vicarious and personal trauma my staff have experienced. I'm also spending more time thinking about how to create flexible, more adaptive roles at NYCH, so we can attract amazing talent and retain our existing top talent in a way that meets them where they are.

**Meera: What advice would you have for organizations who are considering this role?**

**Bonnie:** Be willing to be honest, to the point of discomfort, about who you are, what you need, what your vision is, and what you're not getting right. If you come in and say "We've got a wonderful culture, and we just want you to throw a parade for people," and then the person you hire finds out it's not true, it's going to be a very frustrating experience for everyone. You have to acknowledge the reality of the organizational culture to help make the role a success.



**Bonnie Hunter** is the director of talent and innovation at [North York Community House \(NYCH\)](#), a nonprofit based in northwest Toronto focused on supporting newcomers to Canada, youth, parents and children, and seniors in the diverse neighborhoods it serves. She has been at NYCH for 15 years in roles spanning from program manager to HR director to her current role.



**Meera Chary** is a principal in the Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office. She is also a coach and a facilitator for [Leading for Impact®](#), Bridgespan's two-year consulting and capacity building program for nonprofit executive teams and leads the [Bridgespan Leadership Accelerator](#).

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