

D. Brian Collier: Stepping Out of Legal Shoes into the Nonprofit Sector

Position: Senior Vice President of Community Philanthropy, Foundation for the Carolinas

Start Date: March 2007

Education: BA, Political Science, University of Central Florida, Orlando; JD, University of Florida, Gainesville

Previous For-profit Experience: Associate attorney at law firm

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Senior management positions at a wide variety of organizations including: Daytop Village; Phoenix House; The Victory Junction Gang; and KaBOOM!

Organization Information: Community foundation; founded in 1958; based in Charlotte, N.C.; 35 employees; \$700 million in assets

Brian Collier's move into the nonprofit sector was relatively seamless. An attorney in a law firm, he said he had been longing for more meaning in his work life when he learned from a close friend about a position overseeing government advocacy and legal administration for Daytop Village, a substance abuse organization.

"When I was in law school, I read about really big issues—the courageous and heroic cases—and I thought those were the ones that were going to come my way," Collier said. "I wanted to be creative and do things for the community."

Instead Collier found himself working on insurance cases and doing economic benefit analyses for companies. "I finally said, 'There's got to be something more to my life.'"

Collier's friend introduced him to the chairman of the board of Daytop Village, who talked with him about joining the organization as vice president of administrative and legal affairs. Collier jumped at the chance. He said his legal skills were a perfect fit for his new job, which required him to handle issues arising from areas such as intellectual property, employment, real estate, contracts, and litigation. In addition, he represented the organization at legislative and regulatory hearings at the state capital.

His next nonprofit role was a much bigger stretch. After six months in Legal Affairs, Collier was promoted to the chief executive officer (CEO) position of the \$3 million organization.

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“Managing people and strategic planning were a huge new area for me,” said Collier. “The business side of running a nonprofit kept me up at night and it felt like I had to get my MBA overnight.”

He read as many books as he could find on general management to get up to speed on best practices in managing an organization. “Luckily, going through law school you enjoy reading,” he laughed.

Besides learning new management skills, Collier said one of his biggest challenges when he became CEO was leaving his corporate law persona behind.

“The ego issues hit me like a frying pan in the face,” said Collier. He warned other lawyers who are considering the transition: “Make sure to check your ego at the door—if your ego and identity is in being an attorney you have to push that aside.” He added, “Understand that the nonprofit world has highly skilled and gifted people and people you can learn from if you’ll shut up and listen.”

To illustrate his point, Collier described a situation where his management team was considering a new project. He initially argued against the project, thinking, “someone could slip and fall and sue the entire organization.” In contrast, his colleagues focused on the benefits of the project and proposed ways to minimize the risk in light of the gains for the organization as a whole. In the end, they decided to move ahead with the project.

“I’ve had to stop thinking like a lawyer—always looking at the risk and rarely looking at the benefits,” said Collier.

Despite his positive bridging experience, Collier said lawyers considering becoming bridgers need to be aware of the cultural differences between the sectors. “In the nonprofit world you need to get comfortable talking about soft and gray areas,” he said. “You’re no longer sitting there poring over a difference in legal opinion or having deep intellectual discussions with people about arcane issues.”

Since his transition to the sector, Collier has worked for several nonprofits. In his current role at the Foundation for the Carolinas, he oversees grant-making programs and civic leadership programs. He said the position fulfills a goal he has had for most of his nonprofit career.

“I’ve always wanted to make an impact outside of one area and look at the issues of community holistically without being focused on a single sector,” he explained. “Frankly, in looking at what [Berkshire Hathaway Founder Warren] Buffet and [Microsoft Corporation Founder Bill] Gates are doing with their philanthropy, I wanted to be part of that.”

Collier said he has never regretted his decision to jump to the nonprofit world.

“Making the jump has allowed me to move around the country more than if I were practicing law,” he said. “I also now have an entirely different set of skills. I understand nonprofit law, nonprofit management, and the foundation world. If I ever wanted to go back to practicing law, I have the skill base to build the nonprofit practice of a law firm. But I’m not sure I could go back to the billable hour thing!”

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