

To Build Future Leaders, Get Intentional About Development

Compensation is often cited as the number one reason an employee leaves his or her job. A close second: lack of development opportunities.

In fact, The Bridgespan Group's 2015 survey of 438 nonprofit C-suite executives revealed that 57 percent attributed their retention challenges partially to compensation, but the lack of development and growth wasn't far behind, with half of the respondents noting this as a key reason for employee departures.¹

While compensation challenges are often difficult to overcome, nonprofits can support the development of their staff at little or no cost. Bridgespan has worked with hundreds of organizations to help improve their talent development approaches. In that time we've found that the key to low-cost, effective development is to get intentional about what competencies are most important to the organization's future success and then to work with emerging leaders to craft tailored development plans, rooted in the work they're already doing, to help them build those competencies over time.²

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KAREN CONWAY, VICE PRESIDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES, PINE STREET INN

During The Bridgespan Group's May 2019 [Leading for Impact](#)[®] cohort held in Boston, Principal Beth Jackson Stram facilitated a panel of nonprofit leaders to discuss their experiences implementing one of the program's

¹ Libbie Landles-Cobb, Kirk Kramer, and Katie Smith Milway, "The Nonprofit Leadership Development Deficit," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Oct. 22, 2015, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_nonprofit_leadership_development_deficit.

² See "Four Mistakes Nonprofits Make When Using Competencies in Talent Management" for more on competencies (<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/four-mistakes-nonprofits-make-using-competencies>).

projects, Building Future Leaders, which targets improving talent development. Building Future Leaders helps executive teams define the necessary skills staff members need to achieve organizational strategies and guides them through creating development plans that will ultimately help teams fulfill those strategies.

The nonprofit leaders on the panel, Beth Chandler, president and CEO of [YW Boston](#); Jennifer Childs-Roshak, president and CEO of [Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts](#); and Karen Conway, vice president of human resources at the [Pine Street Inn](#), shared why they engaged in the project, how they approached developing their talent, and how they mapped talent needs to competencies critical to fulfilling their strategies.

Strategic motivations for developing leaders

A number of situations can trigger a look at your internal talent and your organization's future needs. "Don't go through the effort of creating a development plan for the sake of development," Conway said. "Look ahead at your strategy over the next three to five years and determine what competencies and skills you need to deliver on your strategy."

For YW Boston's Chandler, a strategic shift prompted a closer look at core competencies needed to fulfill the organization's new vision. "Through our strategy work, we ended up with a vision of helping organizations create more inclusive environments for women, people of color, and women of color," Chandler said. "It led us to think about what it meant for the program portfolio and to the people we need internally to execute on that portfolio and have the impact we want to have."

At Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, the organization had made a strategic pivot around health equity. To this end it determined that outside of broader development goals, it needed to pay special attention to building a development program for its healthcare assistants, nurses, and clinical staff. Doing this not only would better prepare them for their day-to-day responsibilities but also educate them about equitable and fair compensation levels for people in their marketplace who share these competencies.

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JENNIFER CHILDS-ROSHAK, PRESIDENT AND
CEO, PLANNED PARENTHOOD LEAGUE OF
MASSACHUSETTS

"Part of our mission is improving health equity for our patients," Childs-Roshak explained, "so it stands to reason our internal staff development should also be focused on equity—for example, being transparent and consistent about how staff can move up within their pay band or leadership level."

For the Pine Street Inn, a significant wave of retirements in key leadership positions compelled it to participate in Building Future Leaders when it realized it had no surefire succession plans in place. "As [our executive team] looks out over the next few years, we have many individuals in key leadership and other management roles who will be approaching retirement age," Conway shared. "As we went through our talent review, we

identified leading and managing change, project management, and strategic thinking as critical competencies for us to build,” she added.

Make development a priority

Regardless of the reason, building an organization’s leadership development program requires the buy-in of your nonprofit’s senior leaders. Senior leaders are best positioned to drive talent development throughout the entire organization and establish it as a core part of your organization’s strategy, no matter how demanding the daily tasks may seem.

At the Pine Street Inn, for example, Conway and her team provide homeless services to about 2,000 individuals a day. She knows leaders can be challenged to find time to prioritize development, so Conway chooses to make the time. “We’re all pressed and don’t have enough resources and bandwidth to begin with,” she said. “So, we need to create the space to have these conversations and commit ourselves to that as leadership.” For the coming year, Conway has tasked herself with “playing a key role” in making those conversations happen at Pine Street Inn.

Establish clear and transparent competencies for development

Competencies fall into two categories: core competencies that everybody in the organization needs to build in order to do their work, and leadership competencies to enable current and future leaders to run the organization.³ In studying the research on the topic and by surveying their organizations, all three leaders identified that a main source of staff frustration was lack of clarity about what was expected of them in their development trajectories. The message was clear: competencies should be written down, revised with staff feedback, and communicated to everyone in the organization.

For Conway, the key was taking a collaborative approach: she and her team determined what competencies belonged at each level of development, in other words, what it meant to be at an early stage of development in that competency, an intermediate stage, and an advanced stage. Then she used these scaled competencies in development conversations. “The value of having the scaled competency is that you’re able to, in this development conversation with employees, show them the vision of where they could grow; you can show them what the next step is and align real actual detailed tests and assignments to that,” she said.

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³ See “A Framework for Great Nonprofit Leadership” for more on leadership competencies (<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/a-framework-for-great-nonprofit-leadership>).

Both YW Boston and Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts took similar approaches and created scaled definitions for each of the core leadership competencies. With these laid out, staff and their supervisors co-create their professional development plans. “A supervisor and her staff member can now look at this new definition together and say, ‘Do we agree that this is an area where you need to improve on?’” said Chandler. “Wondering where you stand isn’t left to the imagination.”

Find approaches to development that work for your organization

At Bridgespan, we’ve asked leaders “What experience most contributed to your growth as a leader?” Resoundingly we hear the answers “on-the-job experience” and “work assignments that stretch your leadership muscles.” The 70/20/10 model takes this to heart, and defines a learning approach that says 70 percent of development should happen through on the job opportunities, 20 percent through mentoring and coaching, and 10 percent through formal training.⁴

Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts is using this approach to bake development into its DNA, focusing on one leadership competency and one core competency to develop across the entire organization. The 70/20/10 rule guides Childs-Roshak’s team in its creation of future development plans.⁵

All three organizations are also looking at opportunities for more collaborative development. At Pine Street Inn, for example, one of Conway’s directors is working on how to be more strategic about how she delivers training. “We’re asking the director to expand her focus from her own team of HR recruiters to managers throughout the organization,” Conway said. In other words, mentors and coaches (for a topic like strategic thinking, for example) don’t have to come from within the employee’s own department but can be anyone in the organization who is strong in that skill. “This should motivate more people to enhance their skills and drive ability to deliver on strategy,” she added.

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BETH CHANDLER, PRESIDENT, YW BOSTON

At YW Boston, if several people from different areas are trying to achieve greater strategic planning competency, Chandler wants them to support one another, and she’s exploring ways of providing a framework for them to do so. This type of peer learning group can be motivating and provide a streamlined path to developing a core competency. “It’s another way for us to create efficiencies on the training side,” she said.

4 The 70-20-10 rule for leadership development was originally developed by the Center for Creative Leadership, <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/70-20-10-rule/>.

5 See “Quick Start Guide: Developing Future Leaders with 70/20/10” for more information (<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/quick-start-guide-develop-leaders-70-20-10>).

Organizations that strive to create a leadership development culture centered on competencies are well advised that it takes time and continued experimentation. Such programs are rarely one-size-fits-all, and organizations need to be willing to listen deeply to their staff, strive to build plans that fit into their strategic goals, and be flexible and creative in their approaches. As Chandler put it: “We’ll know [we’ve succeeded] when leadership is meeting regularly about development, and staff understand core and leadership competencies cold.”

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