

Six Skills that Transfer Well to Nonprofit Leadership Positions

Individuals who are making a transition from a for-profit company to a nonprofit organization need to understand the skills required to be successful in the nonprofit sector.

Similarly, nonprofit organizations considering bridge candidates need to be able to evaluate how those candidates' skills and experiences will translate across sectors.

Through Bridgespan's extensive experience with bridging—including in-depth interviews with dozens of bridgers, seminars with over a hundred prospective bridgers, and search and advisory work for more than a hundred nonprofit organizations— we have identified some skills that seem to transfer most readily to leadership positions in the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit leaders should think about how important these traits are to their organizations, and individuals should examine whether these areas are personal strengths or weaknesses.

Influence within an organization

Most, if not all, nonprofit organizations rely upon the leadership of their management team to motivate staff and volunteers to work toward a central mission—despite financial and human resource constraints, potentially hostile community environments, and daunting, intractable social problems.

Within this context, for-profit professionals who have demonstrated ability to influence colleagues and peers toward action, without necessarily having reporting-line authority over these employees, may be well-positioned for success in a nonprofit organization.

Ann Skeet, former vice president of marketing and strategic planning at the San Jose Mercury News, and current president of American Leadership Forum-Silicon Valley, spoke about this phenomenon in her interview: “Having experience trying to get people to do things when you don't have authority over them is critical. This transfers extremely well in the nonprofit setting, in which a leader has to manage volunteers. People who move up through a division, who never have to manage across divisions, do not translate as well [to the nonprofit sector]. In terms of managing volunteers, influencing your peers translates even better to the sector than having been a ‘boss.’”

Managing teams, managing people, managing organizations

“Managing change, managing up and down, managing board and staff...these issues are far more important to what happens [at a nonprofit] than any of the analytical issues.” Connie Jackson offered this insight when reflecting on her chief executive (CEO) position in the nonprofit sector after a career in public finance. Her experience suggests that for-profit managers who have been in a position to work with employees at different levels of the organization (from the sales floor up to the executive suite), and have been responsible for the professional development of other employees, may be well-suited to the nonprofit sector’s culture and practices.

Another interviewee added: “I have seen individuals who come out of a professional partnership—lawyers, real estate brokers, or stock brokers, for example—who have not had to manage teams before, and this does not translate as well.”

The management experience that certain corporate structures instill may lend itself to parallel nonprofit situations. Andrew Spindler, MPA, PhD, and formerly a professional in the international finance and banking industry, described how his work in banking informed his role as executive director of the Financial Services Volunteer Corps, where he manages staff across the world: “Beyond my knowledge of international finance, it was helpful for me to have managed a large staff at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and to have served previously on a far-flung staff at Continental Illinois Bank, where the headquarters were located thousands of miles away from some of the branch offices.

Another bridger echoed these sentiments and singled out managers who have worked in companies with a “corporate affiliate” structure as being particularly suited to leading nonprofit organizations with various chapters or operating units, such as the United Way.

Adaptability, flexibility as a manager

Adapting management style to the situation and people at hand is critical to success and impact in either sector. Prior to becoming a limited partner at Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Co., and the CEO of ACCION International, Michael Chu worked at the Boston Consulting Group and held chief financial officer positions at two other companies. He described the value of his experience as follows: “I have worked in industries such as manufacturing, services, metal bending, hotels, real estate development, and printing. The constant was dealing with other management, dealing with people...In the nonprofit sector, how you manage people differs, but even in the for-profit sector, if you talk to a production manager or to a salesperson, you are talking to two different types of people. In order to be effective, you have to deal with each person differently, read the situation and the people, and respond appropriately.”

Other interviewees reinforced Chu’s perspective on the value of an “adaptive” management style. One interviewee juxtaposed the idea of an adaptive leader with an investment banker, who may primarily work with other bankers and people in the finance field. The question is not so much what field someone has worked in, but whether they have worked with people with considerably different background and pursuits than their own.

The flexibility to engage in different ways with different people was a skill that bridgers strengthened as their nonprofit careers continued. Many found that their experience in both “worlds,” allowed them to play a mediator role between the opposing “business” and “nonprofit” sides of the organization. They can often end up as the bridges within their own organizations.

Working with stakeholders

In the nonprofit sector, collaboration with stakeholders is a vital aspect of organizations’ efforts to create social change. Certain nonprofits may rely upon public schools or community centers as facilities for their programs, while others may turn to neighborhood residents as key participants in a grassroots, community-organizing campaign.

Beyond influencing and managing within an organization, successful nonprofit managers must exert influence outside the confines of the organization. In her public finance capacity, Connie Jackson worked on projects that required her to interact with and mobilize various stakeholders and constituents. Her role required her to align these constituents around a common initiative, such as the renovation of Union Station in Washington, D.C. Her success in her for-profit sector career was in large part determined by her ability to manage these different constituents and respond to their concerns about the project, and the same has been true of her nonprofit career.

Operational experience within a company

Multitasking—the ability to manage a wide range of activities, such as finance, human resources, and communications—is a critical factor in the success of nonprofit leaders in our experience. [Dana White](#) described her experience as a product manager with Avid technologies as extremely transferable to her role as executive director of WiredWoods, a startup youth and technology organization: “As a Product Manager, I was in charge of everything related to the product—from communicating with the engineering department to forecasting to working with the marketing folks. It was a multidisciplinary job, where I had to handle procurement, IT [information technology], human resources, graphics, the press, etc. This broad capability translated over to my role at WiredWoods. The buckets of work changed when I changed sectors, but the process did not.”

Experience in resource-constrained environments

Financial constraints are frequently cited as the main challenge involved in transitioning from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector. Work experience in a resource-constrained environment was a key factor in making a successful transition. Indeed, one interviewee noted that if she ever returned to the for-profit sector, she would prefer to hire a manager from the nonprofit sector, since this person would “have experience of maximizing resources, of doing more with less.”

[David Nelson](#), chief operating officer of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship, said that his experience in starting up a business for his for-profit employer (a Fortune 100 company)—staffing it, building it, creating the strategic plan—was a critical strength when he began work in the nonprofit sector. While one might not think of a Fortune 100 company as a source of candidates who have worked in resource-constrained environments, Nelson’s story suggests that managers should cast their nets widely and probe potential hires on their experiences working with limited resources.

Conclusion

No one will possess all of the skills highlighted in this report, but we believe that nonprofit leaders will be well served by considering each of these factors in vetting candidates from the for-profit sector. With a clear view of their organization’s culture and attributes, managers can make the right tradeoff decisions and bring fresh perspectives that deliver measurable impact.

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