

## Building a Nonprofit Career Path

In today's challenging nonprofit environment, it can be helpful to have a long-term strategy for your nonprofit career, including setting goals for the type of position you ultimately want to hold or the specific organization for which you want to work. But it's equally important to remain flexible and to be willing to stretch outside your comfort zone to take advantage of opportunities you simply shouldn't resist.

Noting that fully 85 percent of senior job opportunities come as a result of a personal recommendation or connection, Bridgespan Group Partner Wayne Luke maintains that the first step toward being intentional in your nonprofit career is to excel in your current job. As he put it, "Unless you're slam-dunking your current job, the likelihood that you'll be recommended by someone else who knows you and can vouch for you really goes down dramatically." In this Q&A, Luke shares more advice on intentionally building a nonprofit career path.

### **Bridgestar: How else can slam-dunking your current job benefit your career path?**

**Wayne Luke:** People who can vouch for you may not just recommend you for similar jobs that fit your long-term plan; they could also introduce you to great opportunities you might never have considered. In fact, the more senior you get, the less important the specifics of your background are and the more important the aspects of how you operate and your general skills and accomplishments.

### **How should you evaluate opportunities while building a career path?**

**Luke:** You should establish four or five guiding criteria early in your career on which to evaluate opportunities. Guiding criteria should be more general than specific and should not focus on salary or title. They might include things like: 'I need to be in a situation where I am constantly learning'; 'I need to report to someone I respect and can learn from'; or 'I must work with children.' When an opportunity clears those bars—even if it's something you never thought of—you need to go do it. Don't let salary and titles be the primary trip points for what you do next. Think about the quality of the fit first and all those other things will become self-adjusting.

### **Should you set a stake in the ground on a certain position, or perhaps on a set of responsibilities, you would like to eventually have?**

**Luke:** Positions and titles have different meanings in different organizations, so simply focusing on title is not productive. What matters is whether the role will allow you to learn new things, whether you will have

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a strong mentor, etc. To me, the most important criteria are the potential for learning and a deep alignment of the mission with who you are.

### **Are there questions you can ask yourself to help clarify your career goals?**

**Luke:** I think you should ask questions like: ‘What would I like my professional legacy to be?’ ‘Do I want a position where I can operate as a sole contributor or do I want to see my accomplishments play out as part of a committed, focused team?’ ‘Why are these particular goals important to me, and am I choosing them because of what others expect of me or am I choosing them because of who I am and how I want to engage my skills to make a difference?’

### **Should all of the opportunities you take on fit squarely with your experience and capabilities? If not, what benefit can stepping outside of your comfort zone provide?**

**Luke:** Some people are most comfortable progressing through their career in a linear fashion, i.e., ‘I’ve done A, then B, so it’s time for C.’ Others see their careers as mosaics, and they are motivated by clearing their own paths, so they do A, then F, then Q. There is no right answer.

However, if you do choose the latter approach, make sure the skills and experiences you *don’t* bring to the table are somehow present elsewhere in the organization, or you might be walking into a situation where driving success and/or meeting expectations might be tough. The benefit of stepping out is that your 30 years of experience are actually 30 years of growing and contributing, not one year of growing and contributing done 30 times.

### **Is it worthwhile to re-evaluate your career goals periodically? If so, how often should you do this?**

**Luke:** Those four or five guiding criteria you set at the beginning of your career—such as needing to report to someone you can learn from—are not likely to change. But as you learn more during your career, you sometimes find the ‘Emperor has no clothes.’ Namely, that a position or set of circumstances isn’t all you once thought it was. Great examples are public company CEOs. That role, given the increased shareholder and regulatory scrutiny, isn’t nearly as expansive and intrinsically rewarding as it once was. Expectations in sectors change and jobs change with them, so it’s probably healthy to re-evaluate every three to five years to determine whether your goals are in line with your current life situation or even within the environment in which you’d like to work.

### **Are there any resources you can use or connections you should make to help define your career goals?**

**Luke:** In my experience, there's nothing as valuable as committed mentors as you navigate your career. Of course, there are peer learning groups, affinity groups, and organizational 'roundtables,' etc., but the one-on-one, "I'm interested in your career and how to help you think about it" approach is without peer in terms of impact and insight.

### **Is there anything else that can help you establish a nonprofit career path?**

**Luke:** Although you may think you know yourself well, don't be afraid to open yourself up to the advice and perspective of friends who often know you and can counsel you better than you think. If you ask for honest and objective feedback, they'll give it to you. Often, they deliver it along with their views on what else you should consider in your career.