

Building a Talent Pipeline

Many nonprofit leaders struggle with filling open positions in their organizations because of time and budget constraints. But being thoughtful about an organization's future talent needs can help an organization develop and maintain a steady stream of people to turn to when it's time to hire. This stream, or talent pipeline, not only can help nonprofit leaders fill critical positions quickly, but also can help them cultivate people who will be able to step into leadership roles—even at the senior management level—successfully down the road. We talked with Kathleen Yazbak, a partner at the [Bridgespan Group](#) in Boston, and Frances McLaughlin, chief operating officer at [Education Pioneers](#) in Oakland, CA, about how organizations can ensure they can find the talent they need when they need it.

Being strategic about talent

According to Yazbak, a strategic approach to hiring is especially important in the nonprofit sector, where organizations tend to be smaller and a single person can have a very large impact—positive or negative. Nonprofit leaders can begin developing a talent pipeline by thinking about how each position in the organization aligns with its strategic priorities. “Insofar as you have a business plan strategy, this is your people strategy,” Yazbak said. “So think about where you will need to be on the people side, and what skills you will need to be successful two to three years out.”

An organization planning an expansion, for instance, can do an informal “needs assessment” to consider what new and/or different skills may be needed to support its growth. Will the expansion create new layers of management, or will it require adding more people at existing levels? Is the organization looking to open sites in 20 more cities, or is it dramatically increasing the size of its existing facilities? “Being intentional about what you’re looking for will be important,” Yazbak said.

McLaughlin, whose organization focuses on education reform, emphasized that thinking strategically when developing a talent pipeline should not be reserved for just senior roles. Education Pioneers, she noted, takes an intentional approach to hiring at all levels, from senior leaders to line managers to staff roles. The key, McLaughlin said, is to determine the functions and roles that really drive the organization's mission (she thinks of these as “high-impact” roles) and to determine what exemplary performance in those roles looks like—in terms of behaviors, mindsets, skills, and experience. According to McLaughlin, an organization's leaders should spend time defining performance standards for high-impact roles, and ensure that recruitment and selection practices enable a hiring manager to differentiate between a

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candidate who will perform in the role adequately and one who will perform at an exemplary level. What does such thorough preparation look like in practice? According to McLaughlin, it includes:

- A shared vision between the hiring manager, department/function executive, and human resources (HR) about the role and its potential impact on the organization. Everyone should agree on (and be able to articulate) the difference between a given role being filled by an average performer or an exemplary performer. There will always be a difference, but does the difference in performance translate to a meaningful, i.e., strategic, benefit for the organization?
- A well-crafted job description that outlines in concrete terms the performance expectations—not just tasks—of the role.
- Specific interview questions and practices (many job candidates at Education Pioneers must complete tasks and projects as part of their interviews) that enable a hiring manager to assess a candidate's prior success and potential.
- A shared commitment to select the best person *for the role*. This means choosing against a “great performer” who may lack key characteristics for the role; it also means agreeing *not* to fill the role with an adequate performer. “This takes incredible focus and perseverance,” said McLaughlin.

“The idea is to differentiate your workforce and know what you’re going after for each position,” McLaughlin said. “I think this happens more naturally at a senior level... But I’d argue that not all C-level roles are strategic, and there are some junior roles in the organization that should be viewed as strategic.”

For example, she explained, last year Education Pioneers identified a critical gap in its analytical capacity. Deeper and more strategic analysis of data is critical to organization performance, so Education Pioneers developed a new role, created a rigorous selection process, and eventually hired an incredibly talented, committed analyst. The role is yielding results in several areas: fundraising, cost management, and program quality.

Building channels

Once an organization determines its future hiring needs, the next step is to establish “channels” to create viable candidate pools for potential openings. Current and former employees, and volunteers, often are good sources for leads and referrals. “These are people who know you and love your organization,” Yazbak noted. For strategically important openings, it can also be highly effective to ask key staff members to take a few hours and personally call 10 or 15 people whose knowledge could help find the right candidate. “It’s just smart networking,” she said, “but it’s important.”

Yazbak also has found that internal candidates for senior nonprofit positions often have a higher rate of success in their new roles than outside hires; hence, it's important to develop promising talent within the organization. The leadership team at [KaBOOM!](#), a Washington, DC-based national nonprofit that builds playgrounds, provides a good example. Team members review the organization's internal staff every quarter, seeking feedback from and having discussions with managers about how best to challenge star employees. "They're making the process of thinking about people's development very intentional and very visible," Yazbak said. In fact, KaBOOM! CEO and Co-founder Darell Hammond has credited the program with helping the organization retain star employees.

Focusing on diversity

Ultimately, the drive to have a talent pipeline filled with diverse candidates must come from the top of the organization, McLaughlin said. Do candidates see a diverse workforce when they visit the organization? Is there diversity on the organization's board and leadership? "If the board and leadership aren't doing more than giving lip service to the issue, you're dead in the water," she said.

McLaughlin said Education Pioneers is working on an initiative to improve the diversity of its workforce and fellows program. Its recently completed first step was to understand what current employees believe is valuable about diversity within the context of the organization. With consensus around why diversity is important to the organization, McLaughlin said, the nonprofit is now focusing on boosting the diversity in its talent pipelines for staff and for participants in the fellows program.

There are many different approaches to increasing diversity, Yazbak said, but she stressed that any program should be part of the organization's overall talent pipeline strategy. One useful step, Yazbak suggested, is establishing relationships with organizations that support diverse memberships, such as the [National Council of La Raza](#) of Washington, DC, the largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization. Individual managers also can help the effort by joining leadership programs such as [LeadBoston](#), offered by the [Boston Center for Community and Justice](#). LeadBoston brings together a diverse group of Boston professionals and helps them develop their leadership skills. "These are great networks to join, and it's great for folks at mid-levels to be part of a leadership program in their cities," Yazbak said.

These partnerships also can be a win-win for both organizations involved. Amy Saxton, who is a manager in the Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office and leads Bridgespan's diversity efforts, offers as an example Bridgespan's work with [Management Leadership for Tomorrow](#). "We speak to their constituents and share information on nonprofit strategy and what consulting in the nonprofit sector is, and the

organization helps inform their talent about Bridgespan.” “Partnering with diverse organizations really should be a win-win for both organizations,” she added.

Making connections

Of course, most nonprofits do not have their own talent search arm to build and maintain their talent pipelines. Education Pioneers relies heavily on referrals from alumni of the organization’s fellowship program and McLaughlin’s own network of 10 to 15 “go-to” people whenever she anticipates a hiring need. “I’m a believer in the power of networking,” she said. “It’s kind of managed word-of-mouth.”

Yazbak said nonprofits also can line up talent through partnerships with institutions. For example, she said a charter school management organization that knows it will soon need several principals or academic department heads could consider building a relationship with [Teach For America](#). Other sources include schools or universities that offer masters programs in social work or nonprofit business administration. Internships or other opportunities at nonprofits also can help attract candidates. [Citizen Schools](#), according to Yazbak, has instituted a program in which frontline workers in its afterschool programs can work toward a master’s degree. The organization heavily promotes the program in its recruiting materials.

Creating an organization-wide effort

While an organization’s CEO is ultimately responsible for steering its people strategy, Yazbak said the organizations that are most successful at building talent pipelines are those that encourage managers at every level to keep a constant eye out for future talent. She stressed that hiring should not be a function solely of the HR department.

At Education Pioneers, developing a talent pipeline is a shared responsibility between the business managers, who best know the needs of their departments, and a small number of HR staff members, who handle the administrative side of hiring. When managers meet a great candidate for whom there is currently no opening, they make sure they capture the person’s contact information in a central database and periodically keep in touch. HR managers can then reach out to those people as openings occur.

It can be difficult for nonprofit managers to devote time to building a talent pipeline, but Yazbak said even small organizations should make this activity an explicit part of every manager’s job. “People know what they’re measured against and that’s where they spend their time,” Yazbak said. “It needs to be prioritized with all the other things that they’re doing and they need to have targets on it: X amount of time spent on networking for talent, serving on a panel at their alma mater to raise awareness of the organization, etc.

They're a little tougher to measure than recruiting goals because you're measuring outputs rather than outcomes, but it's still important."

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.