

Building Consensus, Diversity, and Leadership with Kevin Washington, CEO, YMCA-USA

Starting at the age of ten, if Kevin Washington wasn't at home, he was at a YMCA. In fact, he attributes a basketball scholarship to Temple University to what he learned on and off the court at the Y. "The Y changes lives, and I'm living proof," he says. Since leaving college, Washington has spent his entire professional career within the Y system. This past February, he became the CEO of the YMCA-USA (Y-USA), and is the organization's first African-American CEO. In this Q&A with Kathleen Yazbak, a Bridgespan alum and the founder of executive search firm Viewcrest Advisors, Washington reflects on what it means to be a YMCA leader and the strong role diversity and inclusion will play in building the Y network's leadership going forward.

You worked for the Y in Philadelphia and Chicago, and then spent nearly ten years as the CEO in Hartford, followed by five years as the Greater Boston Y's CEO. How is the Y-USA CEO role different from your previous roles?

Y-USA is responsible to protect and promote the brand; we influence from the center but each association is independent, with its own board. You have to be collaborative to get things done, across this huge network of 2,700 branches nationally. No one leader can do it all, and this is especially true at the national office where we aren't a direct service, in-the-community Y.

Now that I am in this new role, my relationships with association CEOs have changed. I used to be one of a peer group of urban association CEOs, discussing day-to-day operations, but I'm not of that same group anymore.

The Y is a voluntary organization even in your role as a staff person you take on volunteer opportunities. Part of my responsibility in this role is to request our CEOs to volunteer their time to help move the national agenda. For example, one of our CEOs, who came into the Y recently, is a marketing genius; I really needed his expertise on a national campaign, and he has been a tremendous help. We have another incredible leader who has been retired for several years who has volunteered to take on four interim assignments and has done a remarkable job in the process. When he asks me to be somewhere on his behalf, there is no way I can say no to him.

What leadership style works at the Y?

The Y works hard to build consensus. A 'top-down' approach would not be successful. The goal is to engage people and gain their buy-in early so they can become advocates for the work and our movement. It comes back to relationships once again. Of course, there's a formal organization chart, but an informal organization, which is based on relationships, is as important. One of my sayings is, 'the less I have to use my authority, the more effective I become as a leader.' Being effective at the informal is much more critical in my new role when I'm influencing across so many associations. I don't want to use the authority of the Y's brand— I'd rather use strong peer relationships.

How have you prepared your agenda as CEO?

I was asked by the previous CEO, Neil Nicoll, to chair the CEO Advisory Council for the organization's most recent strategic plan. My other CEO colleagues chaired the Youth Development, Social Responsibility, and Healthy Living Advisory councils, as well. We all needed to then engage our peers and colleagues; by pulling in diverse and influential voices throughout the network. Neil ultimately turned us all into champions for this work, given that we had grappled, together, with the issues and priorities.

Related to my agenda as CEO, I want to use our network to scale programs for greater collective impact, increase the effectiveness and efficiency of our federated model, and move our diversity and inclusion work to a new level. As it relates to scaling, our Diabetes Prevention Program, and our chronic disease work are really unique; there is no other organization able to do this work at scale, consider 880 associations, 2,700 facility-based YMCAs, 10,000 communities which YMCA's are engaged in, and 22 million members. That is the network that we have the opportunity, and the challenge, to spread our programs through. We will continue to invest in building outcomes measurements. Our signature programs, such as camping, are critical, and we are now tying in our achievement gap and summer learning programming. We'll continue to upgrade all that we do in our camps, youth sports, and after-school

work, and tie those into measures of social and emotional learning, and closing the achievement gap.

These programs will be critical to making a more effective and efficient federation and to creating the next generation of Y leaders—ensuring that diversity and inclusion is an important facet of that group will be and is my biggest focus and challenge.

Tell us more about the importance of diversity and inclusion in the Y network.

The Y is for all; the movement started in major cities as men came into those communities. Our Ys have been for years a center for discussing and engaging in community issues. For example, as we increase our role with disconnected youth--we prefer to call them 'opportunity youth'—we had 30 Ys come together in Washington, DC, to discuss how we can collectively do more to address this community issue. Our history is filled with examples of this type of work. In Baltimore, our Ys stayed open so that the communities could have conversations about what had transpired. In Ferguson, we are continuing to lead around these issues. We can be a force for healing, and that means we need to have leaders who understand diversity and community engagement: in other words, having people who understand and acknowledge how to work in those communities. Most Ys are reflections of their communities. They will have people who understand the values and customs of those communities, their morals and values.

Given the number of branches and associations nationally, is it the Y's preference to have leaders grow within the network or are you just as open to looking for leaders outside the network?

For many years it was challenging for non-Y executives to be recruited, and succeed, in association CEO roles. Today, we have both kinds of leaders, 'traditional' Y leaders like me who have grown up in the system and others who come in, and go through our Bridge Program. It's about having leaders who have the competencies, the right values, and the ability to incorporate and execute effectively on what we're looking for in our CEO leadership.

We are at our best when we combine forces and learn from each other. Leaders from different fields and endeavors bring different perspectives. The only way we will close our leadership gap and increase our diversity in the senior ranks is by having strong leaders that come from inside and from outside the Y network.

What do you look for when recruiting a CEO from outside of the Y network?

We seek leaders with the competency to build teams, share our values, and believe in our mission. They must respect all opinions, and lead influentially while also balancing business fundamentals.

When we specifically look at our gender and race and ethnicity data for Y leaders in our top 50 Ys, we can and must do better. When it relates to women, who represent 60 percent of our professional staff, we have to work harder to remove our glass ceiling. That includes staff and volunteer leadership as well.

What parting advice do you have for other nonprofits in terms of creating stronger ties with their communities?

One, for all of us, we need to make sure the staff and volunteers understand fully who they are serving and the goals and objectives they are trying to fulfill. The community's thought process needs to be implicit in the planning and delivery of services. Good intentions can get lost when the individuals we are trying to serve aren't considered.

Two, seek the community's opinions; understand their cultures and customs. We live in a very diverse society that is changing rapidly, and our nonprofits need to keep step. For example a Y colleague of mine was talking about his YMCA's camps to members of his community—his community has many Somali families and their understanding of camps was very different to what he was explaining. It required him to adapt his communications to this audience. Another example, a YMCA CEO was discussing with me his community's growing Muslim population. His community's Muslim members do not believe that opposite sexes should swim together or that women should be seen swimming. His Y then decided to close off the pool during certain times so Muslim women could enjoy swimming. Understanding these kinds of things is important.

Third, be clear about what it is you're trying to do. Understand the audience you're engaging with and get them in early so they can be part to of the process early on and shape how you're going to deliver services to them.

Last, be open to new ideas and ways of doing things.

BOSTON

2 Copley Place, 7th Floor
Suite 3700B
Boston, MA 02116
Tel: 617 572-2833

NEW YORK

112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510
New York, NY 10120
Tel: 646 562-8900

SAN FRANCISCO

465 California St., 11th Fl.
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415 627-1100

