Career Imprinting: A Conversation with Monica Higgins

Most senior leaders are the sum of several, if not many, career experiences. These experiences, whether positive and exciting or challenging in the most difficult ways, shape the manner in which we frame our thoughts, make decisions, and even choose our teams.

Ask almost any leader what has influenced his or her career most, and the answer will almost inevitably have to do with a person – a mentor, a role model, or even an adversary. Yet, the organizations in which we work also shape our development.

Some are widely known for cultivating a certain kind of experience in their employees. Many employees who have been through a rigorous "boot camp"-type orientation to an organization or new role can recall the experience, and those who shared it, for years afterward. A period of intense growth or other change can also create alliances and ways of working that influence individuals' career choices and trajectories well into the future. And, some organizations are simply paradigms for the skill sets and standards they set; for example, Procter & Gamble product managers are widely regarded as some of the best trained in consumer package goods marketing, and are sought after by other firms.

For her newly published book, Career Imprints: Creating Leaders Across an Industry (April 2005, Jossey Bass), Harvard Business School professor Monica Higgins has studied the career histories of top managers in biotechnology companies widely known for "imprinting" employees with particular values, work styles and skill sets. Intrigued with this idea, Leadership Matters sat down with Professor Higgins to explore the idea of career imprinting as a tool for nonprofit senior leaders and organizations.

Bridgestar: What is career imprinting?

Professor Monica Higgins: Career imprinting is the process by which people in organizations cultivate and acquire common sets of skills and characteristics that are time and place-specific. The imprint is defined by what we call the 4Cs: Capabilities, which are the skill sets we acquire; Connections, or networks and alliances; Confidence regarding particular ways of learning; and Cognition – what we learn or assume about the best ways in which to work in order to accomplish our objectives. We can identify an organization's career imprint by looking at the kinds of work experiences that people have in a particular organization; therefore, different organizations, even those from the same industry or sector, can cultivate different kinds of organizational career imprints.

What is important about career imprinting?

MH: We are all defined by our experiences, but we are not necessarily aware of how those experiences shape our future choices. Being aware of career imprinting is a way of making this tangible.

In work, the "imprints" that we pick up along the way will affect our preferences in work place and work style, what we value as competencies, and how we interact with others. Some will gravitate toward informal, entrepreneurial organizations and others to more structured settings; some will become immersed in a particular domain while others will choose functional expertise. And while certain modes of communication are cultural norms, the choices we make in how we express ourselves – through language, tone and even medium – are frequently influenced by career imprinting.

If and when we understand our career imprints, we are simply better informed about the career choices we make. Then, as we move forward, some will be attracted to opportunities that reinforce what they already have and know. On the other hand, it's entirely possible that an individual would seek out environments in which they can assume new imprints.

What is the difference between an imprint and the organization's culture?

MH: In healthy organizations, culture is often consistent over a long period of time and derives from shared norms and values among employees. A career imprint is specific to a time and place, and derives from patterns in the kinds of career experiences people have in a particular organization. Having a strong organizational culture can strengthen the career imprinting process.

At the beginning of this conversation career imprinting sounded a lot like it was – or could lead to – cult-like behavior, or "group think." But it's really not, then, is it?

MH: If an executive brings in a group of people who already know each other well and are accustomed to interacting in a particular way, there is a possibility that group-think could occur. The advantage, of course, is that the team members all speak the same language – they understand each other. But the downside is that there is not as much flexibility to think expansively.

In a nonprofit organization, this would be especially important if the new group includes a significant number of bridgers – people who are transferring their skills from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector. This group would need to be good about recognizing what they don't know, and learning both about the sector and from others with whom they work.

What else about career imprinting is especially significant for nonprofits?

MH: We can look at career imprinting using different lenses. For organizations undergoing rapid change, as many in the nonprofit sector are right now, career imprinting can be a useful tool. Organizations in flux can consciously look for certain imprints in candidates it seeks to hire, especially if they require change agents. So if another organization – for-profit or nonprofit – is known for developing people with certain capabilities and cognitive skills, then it would make sense to seek out individuals who have been involved with that organization. Alumni of nonprofits or even for-profits that have undergone similar challenges might also carry an imprint that would serve the hiring institution well.

People seeking new employment, whether or not they are bridgers, should be aware of what imprints they carry, and they should be aware of how their experiences might complement, dovetail with, or clash with those of the people with whom they are to work.

Can you give an example of how nonprofit job seekers can leverage their imprints?

MH: Nonprofit organizations tend to have multiple constituencies, and they value consensus-building highly. Such an organization would be wise to seek out senior leaders whose professional experience maps to a highly collaborative style of working – and a candidate would be wise to emphasize career experiences that are relevant.

People in nonprofits also tend to wear multiple hats. A nonprofit that fits this description should be on the lookout for candidates who have worked for organizations known for their flexibility – perhaps a highly matrixed organization, where people are accustomed to working across functional or other organizational boundaries, rather than one where people are known to work in silos. The person who likes matrices is likely to have been "imprinted" with the ability to navigate organizational boundaries and get things done. This person should be prepared to give lots of examples to a prospective nonprofit employer.

Can nonprofits cultivate career imprinting internally?

MH: Absolutely, and they should – especially when there is an opportunity to relate the imprint to the mission of the organization.

It's hard to generalize this, but I'd say that an imprint that encourages focus on understanding external constituents would help a lot of organizations – and not only nonprofits. However, because nonprofits tend to be so lean, and there are so many priorities to juggle, it might be easy to lose sight of the goal from time to time. A strong imprint will always bring people back to their intended impact.

Also, as employees move out into other organizations and if they are successful in their work, it will reflect well on the organization, enhance its ability to recruit and hire good people, and increase the effectiveness of the sector over all.

How are career imprints cultivated?

MH: I alluded to this before …I think it may be easier for a nonprofit organization to cultivate a career imprint, actually, because there are so many shared tasks and experiences among members of teams.

If the organization brings in numbers of people and gives them similar kinds of jobs and work experiences, they will reinforce the commonality of their connections, confidence and cognition and so, create a strong organizational career imprint. Imagine the power of infusing any organization with the energy of 10 people who created the plan to grow a nonprofit from $2 million to $15 million in five years! I'm not suggesting that teams should exit their organizations wholesale, as sometimes happens in business. I was thinking more in terms of creating, for example, a special initiative within an existing organization and staffing it with a team that had been together for some time.

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Individuals are particularly likely to pick up an organization's career imprint when they are younger and more impressionable. That is why early career is a precious time for career imprinting. However, one also could easily see that a "bridge" imprint could be formed out of the shared experience of individuals moving from applying their skills and expertise to business challenges, to applying them within a nonprofit organization.

How does imprinting affect the career paths of potential leaders?

MH: Some people tend to be cognizant of being "imprinted" – from early in their careers – even if they have never heard the term. Aspiring leaders and managers can externalize the idea; that is, really make conscious decisions to seek out career opportunities that will either reinforce or enhance the imprints they are developing, or provide opportunities to develop new capabilities, connections, confidence and cognition that they will need to move forward.

In order to assure that they make good choices, imprint-conscious job seekers will participate actively in the interview process – asking questions about career paths, prospective colleagues' experiences, etc. But they will also go beyond that, researching organizations' alumni to identify patterns suggesting certain types of career imprints and evaluating whether there is a good fit.

Then, once in place, leaders and managers can use their cultivated imprints to be more aware of the assumptions they make when managing people, making decisions, working with external constituents, and responding to crises – and in creating new imprints for their organizations and teams.

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.