

Cultural Fit in the Nonprofit Sector: A Conversation with Brian O’Connell

A candidate for a leadership or management role can have the right credentials, experience, and accomplishments, but without the right cultural fit, she/he can fall flat on the job. This especially is true in the nonprofit sector, where cultural fit is highly regarded and can often trump a 100 percent match in skills and experience, according to the recent Bridgespan study, “[Finding Leaders for America’s Nonprofits.](#)”

To better understand cultural fit in nonprofit organizations, Bridgestar, an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, invited Brian O’Connell, author of *Fifty Years in Public Causes: Stories From a Road Less Traveled*, and cofounder and president emeritus of Independent Sector, the U.S. umbrella group for voluntary initiatives and philanthropy, to share his perspective.

From the vantage point of having launched and led multiple public service endeavors over the past 50 years, O’Connell discussed why cultural fit is especially important to the nonprofit sector and what it really takes for an individual to be a success in a nonprofit organization.

Can you describe the culture of the nonprofit sector and why cultural fit is such an important factor in the hiring process?

Brian O’Connell: The sector as a whole has a culture of public service of citizens. There’s a very broad base, from arts organizations to advocacy groups, to those concerned about international affairs. Some are even seriously antithetical to one another. At the very first meeting of the new board of Independent Sector, I looked up and saw that we had seated the national leader of Catholic Charities next to the head of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. I thought we had blown ourselves out of the water right from the start! But they got along and obviously didn’t discuss certain topics. That gives you an indication of the culture and the disparity of the nonprofit sector.

Peter Drucker was once asked by a business reporter, “What’s the most effective organization with which you’ve ever worked?” He thought about it and said, “The Girl Scouts.” The interviewer, expecting him to say IBM or some other big business, asked if he was kidding. Drucker said he wasn’t. He pointed out that when you take that many women who really care about the future of girls and women, when you take their commitment to their cause, and when you have a staff that really emphasizes and enables the

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service and impact of all those volunteers, you have an organization with the ingredients for great effectiveness and excellence.

How can nonprofits that need to bring someone new onto their teams determine whether a particular candidate will be a good cultural fit?

O'Connell: It's my experience, born of many sad lessons, that it often takes a unique person to succeed in the staff role of a voluntary organization. My profile of those persons most likely to succeed goes this way: They like people and get along well with them. Liking people is often used as the only criterion for selection and therefore is exaggerated, but in responsible positions in voluntary settings most staff people deal with a wide variety of individuals and must be able to get along with them.

They have a great deal of patience and tolerance. Staff persons work with a wide variety of volunteers who are often at their most excitable. The more vibrant and active the organization, the more this holds true. A staff person must be a stable and patient human being or the emotional aspects of working together for significant goals will get out of hand.

They are mature. Psychologists define maturity as the ability to forego short-term satisfactions in favor of long-term goals. This applies to organizations as well as individuals. Most nonprofit goals are long range and require persistent, dogged pursuit through all kinds of difficulties. The satisfactions are rarely found on a weekly or even monthly basis.

They're willing to work hard. Successful people usually work hard, and this is particularly true in the nonprofit field. There is so very much to be done, the dedication of volunteers is so high, and the number of forces to be dealt with so great that the only way to achieve success is by working awfully hard.

In the absence of prior experience in nonprofit organizations, can one demonstrate some readiness for such work?

O'Connell: By all means yes. Prior volunteer participation can mean a lot, especially if a candidate's roles reveal solid understanding and performance. Even persons who may not have had such experiences, but who impress on the basis of their capabilities to work within groups, whether business, military or teaching, etc., may well qualify.

My partner in founding Independent Sector, John W. Gardner, a prominent educational psychologist and prominent leader of just about every type of enterprise, lamented that society is producing a lot of very good individual performers who are loners in the sense that their goals are to be the *first* at school,

promotions, income, and recognition. The problem is that society, and even the individual leaders themselves, is losing something terribly important, and that is a capacity to work within groups, not simply for the good of the group but because that's the way things really happen in the big issues of our communities, causes, and times.

What can nonprofit organizations do to attract great candidates?

O'Connell: Finding good people and placing them effectively gets far too little attention in the nonprofit world. For example, we might say that we really have to do a major search for our new executive director but that we have to have someone on the job within the month. We also are likely to want a local search firm to do it pro bono, and maybe even that we can't spend money on travel, so we should look for someone close by!

My approach has always been to invest in a search believing that success will pretty much guarantee that at the end of just two or three years the administrative expenses will be proportionately down and the program investments will be way up. That happens when you have a successful team of staff and board, because you'll have greater fulfillment of the mission, which is the essential gauge of success.

One of the easiest ways to raise investment money for the next important level of impact is to undertake a double-headed campaign, which I call, "Achievements Worth Building For and Building for Greater Achievements." The first part gives you the opportunity to determine and spell out the major breakthroughs that are possible, and the second part spells out the amount needed and how it will be raised.

What advice would you give to an organization that has found a candidate who has exactly the skills and experience the organization is looking for, but it's less clear whether or not the candidate is a cultural fit?

O'Connell: If I were not sure of a person's fit with the organization, I would rate that piece as about 50 percent negative. It would take almost an unbelievable rating on all the other items to overcome that negative on culture. That's how strongly I feel about the cultural aspects.

If you're willing to spend the time, you can find out what boards or committees they have served well on. I would not go forward in the hiring process without checking the heck out of it. It's just too likely not to succeed and the damage that is done by bringing somebody in who doesn't work is often more damaging in a nonprofit organization, because you probably don't have that big an organization. If you still want to go ahead with the hiring, then in the final interview you might say, "I'm enormously impressed with you,

but I'm just worried about the fit for you and for us." If you decide to hire the individual, you can say, "I'm going to ask [staffer X] to mentor you on this teamwork/fit issue. I think so much of you that I want to give you extra help."

Is cultural fit less critical for some roles than for others?

O'Connell: I hear very often, "You don't have to worry about cultural fit because this person is simply going to be a chief financial officer or a chief administrative officer." My answer is abrupt but from the heart, and it gets back to the cultural thing: It isn't going to work very well unless such people catch the passion, really understand that they are part of something very important to society, and feel part of the excitement to keep the dream alive.

When you talk to potential for-profit professionals interested in moving into the nonprofit sector, what advice do you give them regarding nonprofit culture?

O'Connell: I think I've covered most highlights, but I might add a bit more on the rewards, and I'm not talking about financial rewards. There are a lot of good human beings and good professionals who need to know that at the end of Friday they've sold more Shredded Wheat than the competitor has sold Rice Krispies®. In the case of nonprofits, sometimes it takes a year or longer to see the results. There are a lot of good people who would get very frustrated in many of our organizations.

Another caution: Nonprofit staff leaders—sometimes more so than the volunteers—can forget the dream. They get the board together, or they send the board a report and everything is about internal operations, things that the board is smothered by. There's rarely much dreaming or excitement. It's the leaders' responsibility in a voluntary organization to keep the dream alive. You get these good people in as staff, and good people on the board, and mostly what they hear about is what isn't going well and what you're worried about. Volunteers and staff need to know that this is special, that even though the rewards aren't monthly, that big things happen.

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.