

Five Tips for Building High-Performing Nonprofit Leadership Teams

Building an effective nonprofit leadership team doesn't take place during a meeting or a retreat. The actions taken outside of the group setting are really what set the stage for high performance.

By Nicki Roth

Many of us have been members of a leadership team, and if we were lucky, we've been on a great one or two. Sadly, most of us recount unsatisfying experiences too. The reasons cluster around a few themes: ineffective leadership, uneven talent, dysfunctional interactions, and lack of alignment or focus. Leading a productive team requires some higher order skills.

Many nonprofit CEOs find themselves overwhelmed by the prospect of having to manage group dynamics amidst organizational needs. There are goals to monitor, budgets to mind, partnerships to enhance, and initiatives that require easy collaboration. And then you have to factor in the interpersonal relationships. When things veer off course, it is common for the leader to pull the team into one room to press for better actions and outcomes. The intent is the right one, but these efforts tend to fall short. So when I am called in to advise a leader on how to develop a high-performing team I begin by deconstructing the issues and actions to be taken.

Rather than thinking about the team in one room, I have the leader take an outside-in approach. A great team is the sum of all of its moving parts. Focusing on ways to build those parts outside of routine meetings will eventually lead to a group of people who look forward to working together and get things done. Here are five suggestions for building a high-performing team:

- **Select the A team.** Make sure that you have the smartest, most productive, *and* most collegial people on your team. When you have hiring opportunities, do not settle for less. And if you have inherited subpar members, work behind the scenes to improve their performance. If that doesn't work, start having the tough conversations and make changes as soon as possible. It is very disheartening to excellent team members to have to manage around the deficiencies in their peers so set high standards, support individuals' efforts to meet those, and move people out that don't measure up.
- **Build strong one-on-one relationships.** Each member needs to have a healthy rapport and unlimited access to you. Schedule regular meetings with each person and make those engaging dialogues. Use some of the time for updates but probe beyond the day-to-day to learn more about what makes the person tick. What is frustrating? What is stimulating? What new ideas does s/he want to try? You need to develop mutual trust that you will both follow through on commitments and you need to hash out your differences in private. Without a strong connection to you (the leader) team members will vie for your attention in unproductive ways. They may become competitive, passive aggressive, unsupportive, or cliquish. This is what creates some of the dysfunctional dynamics.

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- **Create collaborative goals.** To develop an esprit de corps, members need to experience in daily reality their interdependencies. “I can’t complete my goals unless you complete yours.” This collaboration-by-design serves the mission and minimizes individual stardom. Working in smaller subgroups members are more able to sort out their tensions. These shared goals provide the structural glue that pulls the team together.
- **Work out issues between meetings.** Have you ever witnessed a skilled leader facilitate decision making around a sensitive and contentious issue? She presents the dilemma, lays out the various points of view, and describes the end goal. The team conversation is insightful and calm. When she recommends a course of action, everyone affirms in unison. She is not a wizard at managing group dynamics. She has had numerous conversations with individuals long before this team meeting. She has listened to everyone, incorporated input, and persuaded members to make a commitment to her solution. The real work has happened outside the room so the meeting is a formality to signify solidarity.
- **Respect is the only required team norm.** When you strip it down, there is only one behavioral guideline that facilitates high performance: uniform professional respect. Each member must look at each colleague and believe “s/he is fantastic at what s/he does and brings so much value to our organization.” Period. This doesn’t mean that members adore each other at a personal level. It just means that they know they are in the boat with only the most talented peers. With this as the baseline there is continuous collaboration outside the team meetings as well as inside the room.

Let me illustrate with two different stories.

Tomas, the CEO of a nonprofit in the health care space, was so troubled by inconsistent alignment and productivity on his leadership team that he called in an expert consultant. He sang the praises of each of the team members, but when the consultant probed more deeply, she heard something else. Tomas had critical things to say about nearly every member on the team and finally admitted that he wasn’t convinced he had the right people in the right positions. He also acknowledged that he played favorites and had closer relationships with a subset of the team. The consultant urged Tomas to conduct more honest conversations with his team members, but he wouldn’t budge. “Some of these people have been here since the beginning. I can’t possibly confront them.” He preferred to keep the truth about uneven performance swept under the rug.

Tomas insisted on convening a daylong offsite meeting to focus the team and discuss ways they could collaborate better. Although the consultant felt strongly that this was ill advised, the meeting took place. No amount of deft facilitation cracked the veneer of “We all admire each other and get along just fine. We are all on the same page.” The consultant was never able to get Tomas to agree to develop more effective relationships with individual team members or to take action with those who were not well suited for their roles. She terminated the contract prematurely. After several months, Tomas brought in another expert. The last I heard he was on his third round of outside help.

Contrast that with Simone, the founder and executive director of an organization addressing the needs of homeless people. Three years after its launch, Simone realized that the rapid growth and success of the agency was stretching the leadership team beyond some of its competencies. She had extensive one-on-one conversations with everyone on the team. She discovered that some people were not comfortable with the expansion of programs while others

were pushing for an ever-growing agenda. Simone was in the latter camp, and the team was locked in a push-pull dynamic that was stalling progress and creating tensions. She had to get very clear about the growth strategy and determine who would be on board...in terms of skills and commitment.

Over the course of a year, Simone took a series of actions. She clarified the strategy and yearly shared goals for the team. She spent two to four hours a month with each team member to coach them to move forward, learn new skills, or leave the organization. By the end of the year Simone had replaced two people and had made good progress on developing her relationships with each member. The team members were still struggling to work through their relationships with each other, but things were moving in the right direction. When they are together in a room, their conversations are more engaging, the debates more enlightening, and the decisions more unanimous.

The task of developing a great leadership team is less daunting when you break it down into a series of one-on-one connections that are nurtured outside the confines of the larger group. Too often we think the real action ought to happen when everyone is together. But trust me; you have to be a deeply experienced and skilled leader to pull that off.

Leading effective teams is challenging. After working with countless teams, I have come to one simple truth. The absence of shared professional respect amongst team members is a non-starter. Teams will never realize their full potential unless everyone around the table feels they are in the midst of smart and talented peers. You can try all sorts of fancy interventions, but this admiration is *the* fundamental ingredient for success.

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