

How to Develop Yourself as a Nonprofit Leader

Many people who are working within the ranks of nonprofit organizations could become great senior nonprofit leaders. However, in part because of budget constraints, few organizations in the sector have formal professional development programs to prepare mid-level managers for senior roles. As a result, most mid-level nonprofit professionals must take responsibility for their own career development.

One way to begin the process is to tap the experience of senior leaders who already have worked their way up within the sector. To that end, we spoke with six senior nonprofit leaders—all of whom have spent much if not all of their careers working in the nonprofit sector—about their career paths and the lessons they learned along the way. We also asked what advice they would give to mid-level managers looking to move into senior nonprofit leadership roles.

Their reactions are synthesized in this article. These professionals' varied paths cannot serve as precise blueprints for others to follow. Rather, their insights are meant to help others begin to craft their own individual roadmaps to the senior leadership ranks.

Volunteer, inside or outside of your organization

Helen Davis Picher, director of evaluation and research at the William Penn Foundation, which is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Greater Philadelphia region, said one of the factors that helped her advance, after coming on board in 1983 as a program associate, was her willingness to pitch in wherever needed. "We're pretty small, so you can get organization-wide experience just by being involved," she said. "I was happy to be part of keeping things moving."

Other leaders we spoke with agreed, noting that volunteering to help with an event or a special project—particularly those that cut across functional boundaries—can help provide the sort of well-rounded experience that leadership roles require.

"There's a great opportunity in this [sector] to take on more responsibility if you want to... If someone comes to me and says, 'I have an interest in X,' I try to accommodate that," said Maureen Curley, president of Campus Compact, a Boston-based national coalition dedicated to promoting community service by college students. For example, when one of her administrative assistants asked to get involved with public policy work, Curley had the assistant do research, visit legislators, and help draft legislation. Another employee, a program associate, volunteered to coordinate the organization's 2008 move from

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Providence, RI, to Boston to gain administrative experience with an eye towards becoming a chief operating officer (COO). “Step forward with what you want to do,” Curley said. “[But know] that you will have to do that on top of whatever you’re supposed to do for your regular job.”

Maureen Salkin, a director on the Bridgespan Group’s executive search team in Boston suggests that people in program roles seek out volunteer opportunities that touch the entire organization, such as human resources or firm-wide-event planning committees. “Senior operations people have to have a broad knowledge of the organization,” said Salkin. Her own experience volunteering while an administrative assistant to the theater department at the State University of New York, Albany, helped Salkin take on new roles in her organization. Volunteering to help students publicize theater productions helped her land her next role as the department’s business manager and publicity director, where she oversaw staffing, booking, and scheduling operations for six buildings (including a theater). She then became performing arts director. “You’ve got to watch for opportunities and raise your hand,” Salkin said. “Don’t wait to be tapped on the shoulder.”

Gaining fundraising experience also can help mid-level executives with their career advancement. Richard Tagle, chief executive officer (CEO) of Higher Achievement, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that provides enrichment programs for underserved middle school students, got his first experience with fundraising when he worked as a program manager at Public Education Network (PEN). The organization had no centralized development function, so in addition to running their projects, all the program managers were responsible for lining up the necessary funding. “The network I created helped me open doors,” he said.

If fundraising is not part of your job description, Stephen Pratt, CEO of MY TURN, Inc., a Brockton, MA-based youth development agency, recommended joining an organization’s fundraising committee, volunteering for a black-tie gala committee or a strategic planning committee, or working on a political campaign. Such volunteer work can expose you to the mechanics of fundraising while allowing you to take on a wider range of operational duties. It may even raise your profile with the senior management team. “I’m impressed when people in my organization get involved in political campaigns—even if I don’t agree with the cause,” Pratt said. “Getting some exposure to fundraising is the biggest feather [junior executives] can put in their cap.”

Pratt said that staff roles are becoming more specialized at many nonprofits, which can make it nearly impossible for mid-level program professionals to gain organization-wide experience as part of their day jobs. In addition, it can sometimes be difficult within their own organizations for managers to be

considered for volunteer roles that fall outside of their specialties. “I think moving from a programmatic role to an administrative role is getting more difficult as time goes on and roles become more specialized,” Pratt said. “There’s a view sometimes that a great teacher or a great social worker will not be a great administrator.”

However, if you are a mid-level manager who is having difficulty finding the right kinds of volunteer experiences within your own organization, Pratt said that there are still plenty of opportunities available if you cast a wider net. He recommended looking for volunteer roles at other nonprofits whose missions closely match your values, and considering opportunities as diverse as direct service, event planning, committee work, or even a position on a board of directors.

Seek out both formal and informal professional development opportunities

Mid-level professionals can utilize many diverse avenues of learning to gain the skills they need to become senior managers. For example, advanced degrees or certification programs, informal peer networking, professional networking groups, and professional associations all provide vital professional development opportunities.

On informal connections, Curley said: “Join any group that can put you in touch with people you can network with or learn from. If I were in a junior role, I’d seek out people like me at other organizations.” She noted that professionals can often gain valuable insights by talking with peers about the ways they have tackled particular challenges at their organizations and how they are building their own managerial skills. The key is to make genuine connections with people where there is real give-and-take in the relationship, rather than only contacting them when you have an ulterior motive. And once synergy is established with a set of peers, nurture it.

Doing so can be as simple as sending along news articles or reports that have helpful information or forwarding a job listing that you think might interest the person. As Tagle noted, the key is to make sure that you are bringing something valuable to the relationship. “You never know who’s going to open the next door for you,” he said.

Salkin suggested that one way to expand your network beyond your peers is through informational interviews. Sitting down with a person who is doing what you would like to do in your next job can teach you about that job’s specific responsibilities and reveal skills you may yet need to develop to earn that type of role. However, Salkin noted, it is important to prepare for an informational interview as thoroughly as you would a job interview, by deciding ahead of time exactly what you want to get out of the

conversation. Before setting up any informational interviews, Salkin said, it can also be helpful to look at the resumes and biographies of a few people who hold positions that interest you to see what experiences led up to those jobs.

Several of the leaders we spoke with noted the importance of continuing education—including everything from certification classes to full degree programs. For example, when the William Penn Foundation adjusted its strategic plan to put greater emphasis on measuring the results of its programs, Picher enrolled in courses about evaluation. The additional training helped her broaden her range of skills and expand her responsibilities in the organization. And Tagle said that early in his career, he continuously took classes and workshops to hone his finance and forecasting skills. “An aspect of growing in any organization is to keep sharpening the saw,” he said. “Just keep informing yourself and maintaining avenues for growing your skills.”

Increasingly, most of the people we spoke with agreed, formal degrees provide a distinct advantage for those aspiring to leadership roles.

Pratt said he continues to use the skills he gained while earning his 1988 Master’s in Education at Harvard University. “You need to have a full quiver of arrows to run a nonprofit,” Pratt said. “I can think of several great nonprofit leaders who don’t have advanced degrees, but it’s an increasingly indispensable attribute.” He noted that there are increasing numbers of Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs that focus specifically on the nonprofit sector, which had not existed when he earned his degree. Frequently, these programs offer nonprofit leaders a chance to step back from the daily pressures of their jobs and look at the big picture, to learn new skills, and to build their professional networks.

Sandra Gutierrez, COO at Latin American Youth Center, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that serves youth and their families, said the rigor and discipline required to complete a master’s degree program give nonprofit professionals a big edge. For example, at her organization, the people responsible for launching any pilot program must develop and oversee every aspect of it, including the content, the philosophy, the budget, the duration, and the expected outcome. She said program managers who have completed—or who are enrolled in—an advanced degree program often bring to the table a deeper understanding of business management techniques and tools, the ability to juggle numerous responsibilities, plus an expanded network of peers they can tap for advice. This combination of assets often can mean better results for the pilot program and, ultimately, more growth opportunities for the manager. “You see a really big difference in people who come into a program manager role with a master’s degree compared to an

undergraduate degree,” said Gutierrez, who also noted that most of the people she hires complete their master’s while working.

Curley, who earned her Master’s in Human Service Administration at Antioch College, said that the program’s experiential learning approach exposed her to peers who were also working in the sector. “That experience for me was so important,” she said. “All the students were still working while taking classes. I could pick their brains about specific issues that came up and I could learn from them.”

Think “big”

A big-picture view of one’s career is another boon to people who aspire to become nonprofit leaders. As Tagle put it, “A big part of career growth is looking at a broader landscape of where your skills can be applied... and being able to see the dotted lines that connect different fields.”

Tagle’s own career is a perfect example of someone leveraging skills learned in one field to succeed in another. In his position as a program officer at the Conference of Mayors, Tagle focused primarily on financial analysis and forecasting for HIV prevention health programs. But in 1994, he authored a report on children’s health, which concluded that health is a big factor in children’s success in school. The report came to the attention of some people at PEN, who asked Tagle to coordinate the organization’s new school reform program. He took the job, and eventually became PEN’s chief of staff. When he saw the job description for the CEO position at Higher Achievement, Tagle said he saw an opportunity to take his public education policy skills to a national stage.

“In every position I’ve taken, I didn’t limit myself to what I was bringing to the position,” Tagle said. “I said I’m interested in this position because I’m going to learn a lot. There’s this notion of not being afraid to bring the skills you have to the position, but also being very clear about what you want to learn from it.”

Gutierrez also leveraged learning to expand her leadership role. She said that when she first started out as a youth worker she had no long-term career goal other than working with children. But her first job in the field entailed extensive training in facilitation, followed by a requirement that the workers practice what they had learned. Her ability to facilitate sessions with the children in the program caught her boss’s attention. “I really enjoyed running these sessions, and he saw my potential as a leader,” Gutierrez said.

Gutierrez continued to take training classes and to conduct training sessions for other staff members while working as a senior program manager (and in other program roles) at various child-serving nonprofits. She said the nature of training, which includes constant outcomes measurement, gave her a

unique perspective on her organizations and their programs. As a result, Gutierrez often led meetings with funders. “I knew how things fell together at the organization, and I knew in the greatest level of detail what was going on with a particular program,” she said.

Move up by moving on

It is possible to stay at one organization for the bulk of one’s career and rise to the top. Picher, for example, has worked in every program area at the William Penn Foundation, and that experience uniquely qualified her for the oversight role she now holds. But the leaders we spoke with said that it is also important to be willing to change organizations, or even locations, in pursuit of greater responsibility.

Curley won her first executive director position at age 26 when she moved to Vermont to join a six-month-old daycare business for adults. “Small pond, big fish—I think that’s a really good strategy,” she said. “At larger organizations, you may have more opportunities to move up, but you may be more siloed. At small organizations, it’s all hands on deck... If people show they’re enthusiastic and they’re going to go beyond their regular jobs, they’re going to go a lot farther.”

Pratt agreed, noting that his work experiences at various nonprofits have helped him in his current job. “I think I’m a stronger leader at MY TURN for having served at a number of different nonprofits,” he said. “I have all these case studies I can draw from.” However, he cautioned that switching jobs too often can be a red flag to potential employers, who may worry that their organization will be just another career stepping stone. “One does need to be careful about moving around too much—that has certainly been a danger in my own career!” said Pratt, who by age 46 had been a nonprofit CEO five times and had founded six different nonprofits. “You need to balance out the opportunities that present themselves elsewhere with a need to stick it out where you are and create a legacy that the organization is better off for your having been there.”

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.