



From Résumé to Répertoire: Finding the Right Nonprofit Leader

Dr. Antoinette E. La Belle

It's the kick-off meeting of the search committee tasked to find a new chief executive for the nonprofit on whose board you serve. The agenda is set. There will be a discussion about whether to search for candidates in the for-profit sector as well as in the nonprofit community and then someone will be assigned to write a job description for the position so the organization can start soliciting résumés

It sounds straightforward, yet as everyone knows, the work of a search committee can be fraught. Identifying which applicant will best match the chief executive position description turns out to be only part of the job. Figuring out, collaboratively and collectively, who is the right *leader* for the organization is the ultimate goal, and it can be as difficult as it is crucial.

It doesn't work simply to add up selection criteria and match the candidates against them. After all, chances are good that all the candidates vying to head this organization will have impressive backgrounds, substantive achievements, all the right credentials and connections. So just checking off qualifications that fulfill specifications may give you less than the sum of the parts.

Certainly, in-person interviews will be key, but isn't it sometimes all too easy to be snowed by a compelling personality — or to judge a quiet demeanor as a mark of ineffectuality?

Results, on the other hand — a proven record of achievements — are decidedly not vulnerable to subjective responses; you can't argue with them. But is there any way to know whether specific past achievements can translate into successfully attaining a particular organization's future objectives?

In short, how will you all know you're recommending not just the best person out of what is bound to be a very good pool of candidates, but also the right person to take this organization where the board believes it can and must go?

New research findings now offer board members additional help to answer that question. The research, which I undertook during 2008 and 2009, was originally aimed at examining how for-profit executives morph into effective nonprofit leaders. One of the most extensive investigations to date into effective nonprofit leadership, the work

comprised in-depth statistical analysis of the behavioral characteristics of hundreds of nonprofit leaders across a wide range of organizations. (See sidebar below)

One of the key findings was that whether a leader comes from the for-profit world or is a veteran of nonprofit organizations is immaterial to the individual's success as a nonprofit leader. As I reported in my article of June, 2011 (www.boardsource.org/dl.asp?document_id=932), whatever a new leader's origin, "whether...a crossover from the for-profit world, a nonprofit sector hire, a promotional new hire, or a laterally moving executive, all looked at their leadership role through a remarkably similar lens.¹" Nor can any distinctions in performance be traced back to the particular sector or hierarchical level they come from.

About our research methodology

Our research on nonprofit leaders comprised two phases from mid-2008 until late 2009. The first phase focused on leader transitions and involved interviewing twenty-one nonprofit leaders (thirteen coming to the role from the for-profit sector and the remainder from within the nonprofit sector) who were in their role from one to three years. This phase represented the primary basis for the prior *BoardSource* article entitled ***Transition to New Leadership - The First 1000 Days***.

The second phase of research was a 95-question survey of more than 630 nonprofit leaders from diverse organizations throughout the United States and focused on their leadership behavioral and demographic characteristics, cultural assessments of their organization, and levels of personal impact either experienced or achieved. The Competing Values Framework (CVF), developed by Robert Quinn and John Rohrbaugh in March, 1983, formed the basis for many of the survey questions and subsequent analyses. It is this second phase of research that serves as the primary basis for this article.

The research also suggests that writing a job description as part of the search committee's task will prove to be more of an editorial exercise than a tool for identifying leadership. All job descriptions for chief executives pretty much come down to the same objectives: Lead this organization efficiently, achieve its strategic goals successfully, stay in touch with the board regularly, and reach out to key constituencies. And, as I've already noted, it's likely that any candidate who passes the first résumé "read" will be capable of doing all of that.

¹ La Belle, Dr. Antoinette E. "Transition to New Leadership: The First 1,000 Days," *BoardSource*, June 2011.

So if that's what the research shows will *not* work in choosing your next leader, what *will* work? The research demonstrates unreservedly that what counts is the diversity of a candidate's experience. Qualifications, lists of achievements, proofs of expertise are the facts of an individual candidate's suitability, and all are important. But the truth behind those facts resides in the character of a candidate's experience — in the variety and complexity of the situations the candidate has encountered and, if it can be learned, how the candidate dealt with the encounters. In other words, leadership takes place in a context that is a good deal more robust and multi-dimensional than a résumé can convey, and the selection process must reflect that context.

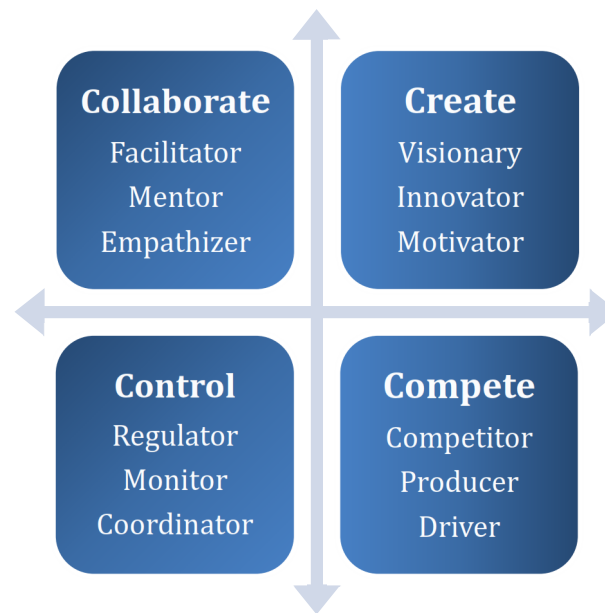
The Dimensions of Leadership

Leadership is a matter of juggling the numerous demands competing for the attention, time, and resources of both the organization and its leader. The demands represent values that may seem to be at odds with one another, even at loggerheads, although all are aligned with pursuing a single strategic objective — namely, delivering on the organization's mission. This competing values framework (CVF) is at the heart of an organization's daily life, which presents any leader with an ever-changing mosaic of situational complexity.

To see what I mean, check that job description again. It asks an individual to be boldly innovative — while he or she simultaneously ensures that the routines of the organization proceed along a stable path. It wants someone able to respond to a range of internal and external constituencies and stakeholders — while driving a singular, shaping vision. It imagines a chief executive who can simultaneously reduce spending, empathize with those whose spending has been reduced, motivate them to new efforts, and define those efforts clearly and in such a way that everyone takes ownership of them — while answering all the personal requests of board members, engaging the press, and forging important alliances with community leaders. All by five this evening, at which time the leader will be expected to host the organization fund-raiser and deliver a speech so eloquent that donors will be moved to open their checkbooks and give more generously than ever before. It's a tall order — an ongoing tug of war among disparate and often opposing forces, all targeting a single individual.

To manage it requires a multiform, multidimensional repertoire of behaviors on the part of the leader, and that repertoire of behaviors also reflects the inherent tension in the leadership task, as shown below.²

² Adapted from Lawrence, K., Lenk, P. and Quinn, R. "Behavioral Complexity in Leadership: The Psychometric Properties of a New Instrument to Measure Behavioral Repertoire." *Leadership Quarterly*, 2009.



The quadrants of behaviors *adjacent* to one another represent values and roles that complement one another. A leader skilled in the control roles is likely to have the wherewithal to drive a highly competitive organization. And vice versa: The drive to excel beyond others is typically accompanied by the capability to keep all ducks in a row, all aimed at winning. The quadrants on the *diagonal* are pretty much diametrically opposed to one another — i.e., competitors tend not to be collaborators, so if you’re very skilled as a facilitator, mentor, and empathizer in your dealings with others, chances are you are less strong as a competitor skilled at beating others.

Of course, it is rare to find a candidate equally strong in all four quadrants and all twelve roles, and it may be unrealistic to look for such an individual. Certainly it is important that a leader have demonstrated ability in the varied roles of all four quadrants; for one thing, only such a leader will be able to identify the need for added strength in whatever quadrant of behavior may require it. So the repertoire must be a given. But the real definition of a leader is not someone who can display mastery of all four quadrants of the repertoire all the time. Rather, it is someone who can both see when it may be necessary to shift the balance in the repertoire to meet the needs of a situation *and* differentiate his or her approach to do so successfully. How? By creating ways — additional staff, technology, other innovations — to shore up the weaknesses and plug the inadequacies. The exceptional leader is thus one who can extract energy from the tension inherent in the leadership task and put it to work to resolve situational complexity and achieve organizational aims. That’s the individual you’re looking for.

Finding him or her starts by understanding the context in which you will be asking the individual to lead. With that as a basis, my research suggests a set of practical steps a search committee can take.

Defining a Leadership Profile

The first step toward identifying who will lead the organization is collaboratively to define what kind of leadership the particular organization needs if it is to operate successfully in the real world in which it finds itself. This is an issue of “what,” not of “who”— not yet.

Two questions are key to creating this leadership profile: What is the character of the organization, and what is the strategic mandate the board has given the organization?

By character I mean the nature of the organization — the properties and, for want of a better word, personality that the organization has or that the board wants it to have. This might be defined in the classic way — as the face you want the organization to present to the outside world, perhaps, or the ways in which the organization energizes its purpose and makes decisions. When your search begins, you will want a leader whose experience can embody the organizational character you define.

Second, at this moment in the organization’s evolution, where is it going, and what does it need to get there? This is Strategy 101 — mission and purpose, as seen in the leadership context—and stating it is a basic responsibility of any board of directors.

Are you looking for maintenance of the status quo — perhaps with a fresh approach — or for fundamental organizational transformation? Is yours a startup organization? Are you aiming for a turnaround? Does the organization need to scale up? Scale down? Reinvent itself? Reframe itself? Defining the strategic mandate that should guide the organization’s purpose and policy will help narrow the search for the right leader.

Armed with a leadership profile that defines both your organization’s character and its strategic mandate, the search committee is ready to begin considering candidates.

Unpacking the Résumé to Find the Repertoire

Once you have developed your leadership profile, look for signals in each candidate’s diversity of experience that suggest how well the candidate matches the organization’s leadership needs.

Four indicators in particular can provide the truth-behind-the-facts of a candidate’s suitability.

1. Organizational size and complexity

Examining the size and complexity of organizations in a candidate’s experience can provide insight into the candidate’s ability to use resources and his/her agility in doing so.

Clearly, the larger the organization, the greater the complexity the candidate has confronted. That very complexity affords the leader a significant number of options for augmenting his or her own capabilities — i.e., for shoring up a weak quadrant of his or her own behaviors or adding greater bench strength, depending on situational needs. On the other side of the equation, small organizations typically require a candidate to wear more hats. That in turn helps the candidate develop a broad behavioral repertoire and hone his or her sense of competence and self-reliance — all of which can serve a leader well as he or she moves up to a more complex role in a larger organization and must assess more complex organizational and leadership needs.

In other words, any effectively led organization, large or small, will rely on behavioral repertoire strength across the quadrants albeit along different paths of composition and strength. So in sifting through résumés and carrying out interviews, the search committee will look for the size-and-complexity experience that is most suited to what your organization is or to what the board wants it to become.

2. Strategic Juncture

Virtually all organizations go through various kinds of evolutionary and/or revolutionary change. They experience times of expansion and of belt-tightening, of getting back to basics and of shooting off in an entirely new direction. They undergo turnaround, and they encounter crisis. A candidate's experience in dealing with these kinds of strategic junctures can reveal how and how well candidates might lead an organization through change. Depending on the changes you foresee or are planning for your own organization, that assessment can be a telling hint.

3. Influence of time spent in the role

Upper-echelon theory on executives in the C-suite posits that leaders effect the most profound change in the first three years of their tenure in an organization. This is true whether the leader has been hired from another sector or promoted from within an organization or sector. My research on a slightly different issue confirms this; in tracking whether sector origin can be predictive of nonprofit leadership success — and finding that it cannot — the research shows that any influence of sector origin in the leader's profile diminishes with tenure. Put a for-profit CEO in charge of a nonprofit, and not only is there no difference as far as predicting success is concerned, but the actual difference in professional profile dims over time; the “newly nonprofit” leader becomes socialized to the nonprofit world in short order, and the socialization buffs the edges of the very for-profit difference the search committee looked for in the first place.

This reinforces the idea that time on the job matters; radical change, if it is sought, is likely to come within the first three years, typically after a period of learning but before socialization and a level of comfort — even complacency — have set in. In short, the leader's change agenda will probably become less urgent over time. Therefore, the extent to which and the manner in which a candidate has confronted the changing nature of the executive role is a signal to be noted, especially as the board considers when and how radically it expects organizational change.

4. Personal Impact

Although difficult to quantify, it's clear that a leader both changes the organization's culture and is changed by it. And while most leaders feel confidence in their ability to deal with this reality, my research indicates that taking over the leadership of a nonprofit organization carries a particularly profound personal impact. Exploring how a candidate has managed the intersection of changing a culture and being changed by it can shed light on the individual's ability to effect transformation in the midst of the process of socialization.

A Long View and a Wide Net

It is important to remember that these signals are only that; they are hints, not fixed properties. But they should be recognized as the traces left by an individual's behaviors, traces that may reveal a great deal about a candidate's potential for achieving what the board seeks for the organization.

It comes down to a question of risk. Given the leadership context of your organization and its strategic mandate, what is the risk that is most palatable to the search committee and to the board as a whole? If yours is a large, global organization, will you risk taking on a leader experienced only in small startups but whose other experience seems particularly compelling? You'll need to weigh the "other" experience against the lack of large-organization experience and determine whether the candidate can learn or be helped to delegate responsibilities to others. If you seek a turnaround, will you rely on a leader with no crisis experience? Suppose the candidate has been successful in scaling up an organization using only limited resources. If you determine that wise use of resources is essential to effecting your turnaround, it may be worth it.

No wonder the work of a search committee is so tough. What seems straightforward — publishing a job description and waiting for the résumés to flow in — is only the beginning. Search committees must weigh and measure their organization's needs as well as the capabilities the résumés don't make explicit, must match one to the other, and in doing so, must determine where they're willing to take a risk.

That is why it is essential for search committees — and their boards — to take the long view and cast a wide net in their search for new leadership. And for that, they must look beyond the job description to the leadership context and beyond the résumé to the truth of experience.