

Ross Maund: Doing Your Homework to Smooth the Transition

Ross Maund has some advice for private-sector professionals who are considering moving to the nonprofit sector: Do your homework about the sector before you take on a nonprofit leadership role.

It is advice Maund says he wishes he had received before he became president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Junior Achievement (JA) of Canada, which provides educational business programs to youth, in October 2005. (At that time, he also took on the role of president and CEO of the Canadian Business Hall of Fame, which was established by JA to recognize outstanding business leaders in Canada.)

“I had no comprehension of both the decision-making processes and the pace associated with the not-for-profit sector,” Maund said during a recent interview with Bridgestar. “And I’m not judging nonprofits as slow versus for-profits—it’s a different dynamic.”

Maund had been extremely successful in his 40-year career in the business sector, holding several senior executive positions in several global businesses in Canada and the United States, including president of Compass Group Canada, president of Aramark Corp., executive vice president and general manager of Versa Services, and vice president of Marriott Services Canada.

In his various business roles, Maund dealt with many suppliers and customers, but when he transitioned into the nonprofit sector, he was caught off-guard by the sheer number and variety of stakeholders, all of whom play vital roles in the success of JA. Maund oversees 150 paid staff members spread across Canada, plus 60 offices of JA licensees and 14,000 business volunteers who deliver JA’s programs in schools with 2.4 million volunteer hours annually. He also must coordinate JA’s program development with government officials, school administrators and teachers, and help motivate leaders from Canada’s business schools and the business community, who provide about 85 percent of JA’s funding.

“Many of these dozens of stakeholders have very different views of the organization because of how they interact with us,” he said. “So we have to spend a lot of time thinking about, talking to, and listening to all those different elements to try to bring some kind of symmetry to what they’re doing for the organization.”

Maund jokes that he never knew as much about the nonprofit sector as he did on his first day on the job, when he walked in thinking he had all the answers. “This sounds awfully naïve, but I came in [to the nonprofit sector] thinking, ‘This ain’t that tough,’” he said. “We have to figure out what are the important metrics and how are we going to measure them and hold people accountable.”

To Maund’s surprise, his business-based approach was met with resistance, if not outright hostility. “It was like I was a Viking coming in to plunder!” he said. “People were looking at me and saying, ‘You don’t get it. We’re mission-based.’”

After encountering strong and vocal resistance from employees and affiliates alike, Maund spent several months regrouping. Rather than making any further decrees about the need for metrics and accountability, he opened a dialogue about ways the organization could accomplish even more toward its mission if it had a good business model. He says that dialogue continues today.

“We still are struggling with people not wanting measurement,” Maund said, “but we created a dedicated national initiative that allowed the affiliates and national leadership to collaborate in establishing what we have called our ‘Vision Framework’ process. This initiative has been in play over the past two and a half years and has included a wide variety of local and national JA stakeholders. It has been progressively helping our people analyze their environment, set direction (vision, values, key performance indicators), revise systems and structures, and ultimately change behaviors for the better.” He added, “Currently, we are working on systems and structures through teams that are made up of local and national management personnel—each team has a set of agreed upon projects of importance to our mission and operators.”

Although he spent nearly six months talking with members of JA’s board of directors before taking the CEO position, Maund says did not get an accurate picture of nonprofit culture because the directors had the same business background as he did. Since taking the JA role, he has built up a large network of nonprofit leaders. He turns to these peers frequently for advice and believes he could have avoided some of his early missteps if he had started building that nonprofit network much earlier.

“I would absolutely recommend that anybody contemplating going into the not-for-profit sector spend time in advance meeting nonprofit leaders and asking some well-constructed questions,” Maund said. “They should do a lot of listening to people at the same level as they think they’re coming in,” Maund said. “If they’re looking at a CEO position at a not-for-profit, they should find some key people they can go to and hear their experiences. I think if I had had the wisdom to do that, I wouldn’t have struggled as much in the first couple of years.”

Once on-board at a nonprofit, Maund advises against reacting to your initial impressions. “Your gut feel is less likely to be correct than it was in your corporate life, and you need to hold your water. Socialize your ideas before acting on your impressions.”

Maund’s passion for JA’s mission is what sustained him during the early rough patches, and therein may lie another lesson for senior executives transitioning into the nonprofit sector: Don’t underestimate the importance of ensuring that your values align with those of the organization you’re joining. As Maund said, “The mission of the organization is completely aligned with what is important to me.”

While Maund advises aspiring nonprofit leaders to be better prepared than he was, getting off to a rough start doesn’t necessarily mean that you can’t succeed in the nonprofit sector. “At the end of the day, if you have really good leadership skills, that’s going to come through,” he said. “The environment for everyone who is part of your organization, from people at the affiliates all the way through to your own staff, is going to be enriched as a result of those skills, and all of those people are going to start seeing it.”

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