

Jessica Zander: Wearing Multiple Hats at The Steppingstone Foundation

Position: Director of Finance and Administration, The Steppingstone Foundation

Start Date: May 2005

Education/Certification: BA, Anthropology, Washington University; MBA, Management and Social Policy, Brandeis University

Previous For-Profit Experience: None

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Over 15 years general management positions in a variety of nonprofits including the American Red Cross and WGBH in Boston, MA

Organization Information: Youth development; founded in 1990; based in Boston, MA; 38 staff; \$3 million budget

What brought you to The Steppingstone Foundation, and what were you doing before you began working there as director of finance and administration?

I've been working in nonprofit management positions for most of my career. My most recent position was serving as a business manager for six years at WGBH, the public radio and television station in Boston, MA. I developed and managed a budget of \$5 million and facilitated all my department's administrative needs, including budgeting, legal, human resources, information technology, and facilities. I felt like I was pretty well informed in these areas, and could rely on each department for their particular expertise. However, I had the least practical experience with accounting, other than AP/AR functions. Over the past year, I feel like I've accumulated the accounting experience I wish I had prior to coming in, and now I'm up to speed. But I am still not a CPA, so I have learned to access relevant resources when I do not know the answer to something myself.

What attracted you to the Steppingstone position in particular?

I was attracted to the Steppingstone position because of the mission, and the opportunity to have this mixture of responsibilities that I love and to represent a whole organization in this capacity. The variety of activities I'm engaged in keeps it interesting and fresh, and in this size organization, you can be involved in all these areas. At WGBH I served a very similar function, but in a much larger, centralized organization. Therefore I did not have as many opportunities to get involved in, or influence organizational outcomes.

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What is your role as director of finance and administration?

I oversee budgeting and accounting, HR, facilities, and IT, including website restructures and maintenance. I supervise a part-time bookkeeper, a part-time operations manager who does our payroll/admin/tech support, and the receptionist. The finance component includes preparing the board reports, and working with the finance committee.

What challenges did you face when you first joined Steppingstone?

Before I joined Steppingstone, there were a number of part-time staff doing pieces of what my job ultimately became, and some projects had not yet been undertaken, since there was no one in this role. The position was new for the organization. The accounting piece was more complicated than I had realized. The organization was operating on a cash basis, as opposed to an accrual basis. I knew the basic stuff, in terms of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP), but I had no experience managing the transition from cash to accrual in the middle of a capital campaign. We brought in a consultant to help with the overall project, but even so, it was a challenging transition. I had to learn a lot on the fly in the first year.

What has surprised you about the job or the organization?

I already mentioned the organization being on a cash basis for accounting. That was definitely a surprise. In retrospect, I should have asked that specific question during the interview process, and probably should have requested we outsource the entire project. There are other questions I could have asked about the different areas that are my responsibility, mostly in the accounting realm.

What advice do you have for other CFO job seekers?

Definitely ask a lot of detailed questions about how the various areas of your job are structured, what kind of resources you will have to address challenges, and what the relationship will be like between you and the board of directors. Look at the organization's 990 on Guidestar if it is available, and ask for their audited financial statements, and look for weaknesses or red flags. In the accounting and finance areas specifically, make sure to ask about whether the organization is on a cash or accrual basis, and what kind of financial software they use. Also of interest might be what resources might be available to help with HR or IT issues, and how much is documented across the organization in HR, finance, and IT. I've learned a lot in the past year and it's been challenging but it's also been great.

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