

David Nelson: Scaling the Wall into the Sector

Position: Chief Operating Officer, National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)

Start Date: 2001

Education: BA, History, Northwestern University; MBA, Marketing, Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University

Previous For-Profit Experience: IBM (33 years)

Previous Nonprofit Experience: none

Organization Information: National organization teaching entrepreneurship skills to low-income youth; founded in 1987; based in New York, NY; 57 employees; \$9 million budget

For over 30 years, Dave Nelson worked at creating a successful career at IBM; it was a career and company he grew with and enjoyed. His ascent within the company took him to China, where he helped run some of the biggest accounts for the computing giant. While there, Nelson received an unusual letter from a childhood friend, who as an adult established a career as a successful attorney. Enclosed in the letter was a press release, announcing the appointment of this friend to the number two position at a foundation. The note attached said, "You may find this amusing but I just wanted to let you know..." Nelson responded, "Amusement was not the first thought that came to mind, envy was." This letter from an old friend turned out to be a watershed moment for Nelson.

For most of his professional life, Nelson had thought he would have a second career and, for a long time, his aspiration was to teach. When he returned to the United States from China, he began investigating his options. Despite his personal enthusiasm and professional experience, he quickly ran into several different walls. He believed that foundations were the place for him, yet they had no interest in him given his corporate background. He knew he had reached a low point when an executive search professional told him, "Dave, you aren't going to get this job, they don't care that you've run a \$600 million organization, they want someone with nonprofit experience."

His enthusiasm was tempered but not lost, for he persisted, leaving his job to fully focus on the search. A year and a half later, he found himself interviewing in the office of Steve Mariotti, founder of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE). NFTE was looking for a chief operating officer who could implement an ambitious strategic growth plan.

Of this first meeting, Nelson commented, "Steve was skeptical. He was worried that at 60, I wouldn't have the energy for the place. He was also concerned that I came from this big, bureaucratic, hierarchical

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place, and that I always had a staff to do things for me." Nelson allayed Mariotti's fears by explaining that, in fact, the experience he had at IBM was counter to Mariotti's expectations. He assured Mariotti that he was a hands-on professional, who wanted the opportunity to use his corporate skills to contribute to a social cause about which he was passionate.

As Nelson began his new job, he didn't make any assumptions and he listened carefully. Through his actions, he disproved the concerns of his colleagues about his for-profit background and the idea that he would change the culture of NFTE. He rolled up his sleeves with the team, and Mariotti empowered him to take the reins. While Nelson did not assume that his previous experience would give him all the answers, he did realize that his 30-plus years at IBM had prepared him well for the tasks at hand. His new and old positions required him to oversee networks of offices and manage a diverse group of employees.

Nelson's acquired skills from his earlier work now had new applications as he helped a committed organization attain new levels of social impact. Mariotti commented on the impact of Nelson's previous experience, stating, "He has brought senior-level IBM knowledge and skills to us, and it's been invaluable. There is almost no area of our operations that he hasn't improved."

Three years after Nelson joined the organization, NFTE had increased the number of students in the program by over 150 percent—from 6,800 to 17,000—and NFTE was ahead of its strategic growth plan. When asked about his experience with the organization, Nelson simply and humbly stated, "I am getting more out of this than I am giving."

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