Lost in Translation: Common Language Pitfalls for Bridgers

You are a for-profit executive who has decided the time is right for you to move to the nonprofit sector. You have done a careful self-assessment to determine how your skills, qualifications, and personality traits could translate into specific nonprofit positions. Your resume includes nonprofit volunteer experience, and maybe even service on a nonprofit board. There is a particular nonprofit mission about which you feel strongly and your research and networking efforts have helped you line up interviews with several nonprofits who share that mission. You have practiced your interview technique. What could possibly go wrong?

Even the most prepared job candidate may inadvertently say the wrong thing during a job interview. For those bridging to the nonprofit sector, the risk is even greater because there are distinct differences in the language used in the two sectors, and interviewers may be especially sensitive to these differences when interviewing someone whose career has been predominantly for-profit. Thus, a perfectly acceptable term in corporate America may elicit a negative reaction at many nonprofits.

So, while it is crucial for bridgers heading into interviews to ask, "What kinds of things can I say that will help me convince an employer that I will be able to successfully navigate the transition from for-profit to nonprofit?" it is equally important for them to ask, "What kinds of things should I not say?"

Nonprofit senior executives—among them both long-time nonprofit leaders and recent bridgers at a wide variety of organizations—have given us specific examples of language that have raised a red flag for them in the hiring process, as well as their general advice on this topic. While they all agreed that their main focus in an interview is to examine the applicant's fitness for the job, not to nitpick his or her choice of words, they noted that a job candidate who can bridge the language gap makes a far more favorable first impression.

The following nonprofit leaders provided insights on a sampling of words that give them pause, and offered some valuable advice on how bridgers can avoid getting "lost in translation:"

Pat Brandes, senior advisor, The Barr Foundation
Marshall Chapin, former chief operating officer and chief financial officer, Envision Schools
Martha Mueller Cook, managing director, Boston Plan for Excellence
Jane Fischberg, executive director, Rubicon Programs, Inc.

Andy Kaplan, chief financial officer, DonorsChoose.org

Sofia Michelakis, senior manager, partner development, Social Venture Partners Seattle

Ronald Ries, chief financial officer, Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Inc.

Bruce Skyer, chief financial and administrative officer, Nonprofit Finance Fund

Carol Tienken, chief operating officer, Greater Boston Food Bank

Victoria Vrana, vice president, communications and assessments, Venture Philanthropy Partners

Kristen Growney-Yamamoto, chief financial officer, Glide Foundation

Bridgestar: What specific terms or expressions should bridger candidates try to avoid using during an interview?

Chapin: I think the biggest one is referring to "the company" versus "the organization." I'd actually steer away from any of the others as well: "firm," "corporation," etc. And I would caution bridgers from selling their experiences via any of the other business lingo: ROI (return on investment), EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization), vertically integrated, blah, blah, blah. I'd steer clear from talking about successes in financial terms and more towards the impact I had on people and culture.

Tienken: This has got me thinking about words I hear that send chills down my spine! When bridgers walk in and start talking about CAGRs (compounded annual growth rates) and net profits, that raises people's hackles.

Fischberg: I have heard some pretty bizarre things in interviews. One of the strangest overall was, "I want to work for a nonprofit so that I don't have to worry about the bottom line."

Ries: Some people come at this with a tone or set of inaccurate judgments about the nonprofit sector. For example, someone from the for-profit sector said to me: "It's different, right? Not as savvy or sophisticated as the for-profit sector?" Or, someone describes the nonprofit sector as a "second-class environment." This can be very insulting. Using the phrase "the real world" in reference to the for-profit sector ONLY is a real turnoff…

Brandes: It makes me wary when someone says that now they want to help "make a difference" and then goes on to talk about what value they think they can add, which is almost always what they have learned in a for-profit. Stronger candidates spend more time learning what the organization needs, listening for needed skills that they may have, and translating them to fit the situation.

Bridgestar: It sounds like business jargon typically doesn't go over well in a nonprofit interview. Are there business terms that are okay for bridgers to use?

Kaplan: I think you can use business terms in the context of the organization you're working in. Margin is margin, fixed costs are fixed costs, breakeven is breakeven. And you have to help people understand what those mean in the context of what they're doing.

Growney-Yamamoto: But it's also important to know which terms are used in nonprofits versus for-profits. For example, I should refer to our financials as a "statement of activities" rather than an "income statement" or "profit and loss statement." [As a bridger once myself] I still get caught up on this.

Tienken: Over time, I have seen words like "metrics," "performance measurements," and "strategic plans" move into the nonprofit lexicon.

Vrana: I think that assuming that those in the nonprofit sector don't know the business terms can be just as bad (and totally condescending) as using jargon blindly without stopping to see if it's registering with anyone.

Michelakis: And you have to remember that the nonprofit world has its own jargon as well—"outputs," "outcomes," "evaluation," "major donors," "development," "stakeholders"…terms that everyone looking for a job in the nonprofit sector would want to be familiar with.

Growney-Yamamoto: There's a whole lot of new language bridgers need to learn, in addition to unlearning old ways of communicating.

Bridgestar: In the for-profit sector, people talk about "making your mark" in your first 100 days in a new job. Does that apply in the nonprofit sector?

Brandes: Actually, in my opinion, the whole concept of "making your mark" is a bad phrase, as it is antithetical to the idea of a collaborative work space where mission is more important than individual success.

Skyer: When I got my first nonprofit job, I had been warned about not coming in as a bull in a china shop as the "know-it-all" from the for-profit world. A "Type A" personality works well on Wall Street, but it may be much less effective in the nonprofit world.

Kaplan: Even if you joined a for-profit company, I think the first two to three months of the job, you have to listen a lot and talk a little. All those same soft skills apply no matter where you're going.

Tienken: When I left Polaroid to join The Greater Boston Food Bank as chief operating officer I wanted to be taught. My first request on coming on board—before I knew about The Food Bank's orientation program—was to have a month of complete immersion in the organization. I knew that I had to get pretty deep into the organization during the first month, before getting caught up in any specific tasks. I wanted to learn and to get to know the staff. I rode on the delivery trucks, worked in the warehouse, reviewed all the procedures, etc. I did pretty much everything that people on the operations side do. Actually, I think people were expecting me to come in and upset the apple cart right away. Instead, I did a lot of watching and participating. That really helped build trust.

Fischberg: Coming into any organization you need to keep an open mind, but use your critical thinking skills. Don't dismiss things out of hand before learning how they got to be that way. Peter Drucker once said that the top leaders of the nonprofit sector could shift into the private for-profit sector and do the job with finesse, but that the opposite cannot be said.

Ries: When someone enters this environment, they should absorb everything they need to know. Don't try to impress people with your "credentials" too much at first. Learn their culture and methodologies. There will be those moments when your expertise and business skills will show those around you who you are, what you know, and how you can influence people and process.

Vrana: I think it's a fine line to figure out how to introduce nonprofits to concepts and techniques without turning people off completely to what you have to share.

Bridgestar: What other advice on this topic of language do you have for bridgers?

Vrana: There are some general communication style issues and cultural sensitivities to think about. Most nonprofits we work with are about empowering individuals or communities. Terms like "inner-city," "ghetto," and "disadvantaged youth," with all their race and class overtones, can be hot-button terms. Good listening is key.

Tienken: In terms of using specific words, the differences tend to be cultural. Some words are okay in one nonprofit organization, but might be considered offensive in another organization. Some examples include: "Working poor," "low-income," "poor people," "uneducated," "disadvantaged."

Growney-Yamamoto: Even if you get the language right, there are a host of other issues involved with communicating…

Vrana: …For example, looking at your BlackBerry during a meeting could shut things down instantly.

Brandes: Be humble—recognize that lots of business theory does not apply and show an understanding of the differences between the for-profit and nonprofit cultures and systems, e.g., the capital markets, the lack of resources and all that implies, the sacrifices people make to work in the sector, and the importance of cultural competence.

Michelakis: Often it's less the terms used—though that's important—but more how the person communicates. Are they open? Curious? Respectful? Or do they barge in offering solutions without seeming to invest the time to get to know the organization? And are they aware of non-verbal cues and body language? Are they able to explain terms in a non-condescending way?

For those transitioning from the for-profit sector, it is of course important to prepare to speak effectively in an interview about why you believe you are a good fit for the role and the organization, and how your for-profit experiences will translate to the nonprofit sector. However, it is also important to avoid using the wrong kind of language. Some nonprofit organizations embrace the for-profit vernacular more readily than others, and bridgers will do well to assess an organization's culture and preferred use of language before and during the interview process to make the best possible impression.

That said, even if the wrong words are spoken, having the right attitude can often compensate for a verbal blunder. As Cook concluded, "Openness and transparency are more important than any specific word usage. If someone has the right spirit, using the wrong word will be more easily forgiven and forgotten."

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