Recruiting and Job Hunting in Tough Economic Times

During a trying economy, having the right people on board as well as finding the best professional opportunities are of the utmost importance to nonprofit leaders. In this Q&A, Bridgespan Group Partner Wayne Luke, head of executive search, shares his advice for recruiting leaders and conducting job searches during tough economic times.

What should organizations look for in senior leaders—what skills and personality traits—given the tough times we face?

Wayne Luke: Senior leaders should be able to demonstrate an unswerving sense of clarity regarding the mission of the organization and an understanding of how important the organization's progress is to its constituents. Their examples and "stories" should reflect tenacity, resourcefulness, and an inherent sense of optimism tempered by the instincts that come from practical experience. That's a lot, but nonprofits can do with no less, especially in difficult times.

What is the appropriate blend of leadership (define) and management (define) needed in a leadership team? Does this vary by role?

Luke: Leadership is the ability to instill passion and vision in others. Leadership influences others to achieve and aspire to goals never thought possible, and to enable each person in an organization to feel that their individual contribution is indispensable to the collective effort.

Management is the process of ensuring that every asset is put to its best use in an organization, and of making informed adjustments to the enabling processes of the organization as it pursues its mission.

For example, leadership on an aircraft carrier is the process of setting the course, articulating the mission, assembling and assimilating the crew, and communicating clearly as to how the mission can only be achieved through teamwork and mutual support. Management on an aircraft carrier is making certain that the watch duty schedules are workable, that everyone gets fed, that there is enough fuel to carry out the mission, and that everyone knows the duties they are expected to individually dispatch.

There is no standard formula for the right blend between leadership and management in an organization; in fact, the blend should be dynamic. In difficult times, leadership is what continues to inspire people and deepen convictions about the possible; while management makes sure that each asset is properly and

fully deployed.

In robust times, leadership runs ahead of the pack to continually chart the course and management works to ensure enough assets are in place to keep pace. Any role can take on the primary aspects of leadership or management, but every person in any role tends to display a "major" and a "minor." It may be hard for the leader to dive into the weeds of management, and it may be difficult for a manager to become an inspiration and source of energy for an

organization. Yet, the smart leader and the capable manager both know how to shore up their gaps in order to ensure success. Sometimes it's with whom they surround themselves and other times it's what they can muster in terms of personal capacities grown through experience and maturity that helps an executive carry the day.

How do you probe for these in a recruiting environment? a. Vetting resumes b. Screening candidates c. Short-listing

Luke: Resume screening can provide insights into career progression, what the person views and values as major accomplishments and contributions, and how he/she packaged and leveraged experience into an engine for career progression. But it's in "deep dive" interviews, based upon detailed discussions of real-world professional situations, that you will always expose styles, personal measures of success, specific actions taken, and lessons learned in any person's background. Then, of course, the comprehensive referencing process will help ensure that "what you see is what you get" in a candidate, and how best to surround and support the candidate in their new role.

How do recruiters think about generalists these days? Is it still the case that organizations benefit from hiring generalists in senior leadership roles—or are the expectations of leaders such that specialists are needed? Does this vary by organization size, domain, or role?

Luke: True leaders tend to be highly fungible across domains, varying organizational sizes, and most roles. So, senior leaders do indeed seem to be capable and highly valued generalists. The biggest mistake most organizations can make is hiring to their strengths, particularly at the senior most levels. There is the old adage regarding experts that says, "An expert is someone who learns more and more about less and less until they know a lot about nothing." Certainly specialists are key in highly technical roles. But the ability to mobilize and inspire people in a setting where fresh perspectives and alternative points of view are tempered by an abundance of experience and wisdom in those surrounding the new

2

hire is where generalist leaders can truly shine.

Do recruiting organizations really need to broaden and deepen their candidate pools? Why? Can you give some examples?

Luke: Without experimentation and a willingness to think differently about a variety of candidates, an organization will only value and seek out what they already know to be true, versus what might be true. It's in the search for what's possible that organizational learning and new frontiers typically emerge. This idea of what's possible must be explored by considering a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences.

As the hiring process progresses, any candidate hired (or internally promoted) should experience the dynamics of comparative scrutiny. This is where the candidate has been assessed against the best qualified and available talent and has risen to the top. Internal candidates, no matter how talented, should want to know they were compared against a broad and deep pool of outside candidates and ultimately prevailed. It's as simple as "I felt I deserved it, and I dove in and won this job" versus "I was next in line and took this job."

What is the one thing in the recruiting process that any organization must get right? (For example, is it scoping the role, job description, interview process, internal alignment, candidate outreach strategy, interview guide, compensation, references, on-boarding, something else?)

Luke: An honest answer would be "all of the above." But, to be more specific, the process by which all of the affected stakeholders in the hire are able to converge on four or five key determinants for considering a candidate is critical to successful recruiting as well as to the success of the recruit. Failure to align around what "good" looks like in the role is almost always the reason why new hires fail or never achieve the impact expected from their decision to join the team.

What advice do you have for nonprofit professionals who anticipate changes in their employment status?

Luke: Don't panic and don't let some overwhelming sense of failure immobilize you. Smart and successful organizations are expected to expand and contract in keeping with their opportunities. Think about those areas of contribution you most enjoy, where your personal and professional sense of mission lies, and what kinds of people and leaders you like to be surrounded by in your daily settings.

Be intentional about your next career decision. Be willing to be specific about the kinds of opportunities

you seek. Don't try to be a "one size fits all" executive. Instead, through people who know you well and who have your best interests at heart, find out where they see you being most effective and experiencing the most joy. Then, identify those organizations and roles most consistent with who you are and with where your passions can play out most effectively.

Your message, based upon having been very honest with yourself and true to the observations of those who know you, should be, "Here are the settings where I know I can add the most value, where my own drives and passions can be fed, and where I'm certain I can thrive and help those around me thrive as well."

This self-evaluation process is equally valuable for those already seeking new opportunities.

Where should a business executive start if he or she is considering a career change to the nonprofit sector?

Luke: They should be intentional about creating and targeting the short list of organizations that align with their sense of professional "place." A great question to ask is, "If I could apply my talents and be successful in this organization, how would I feel about the outcome?"

Be very honest about your own talents, capacities, and passions. Then, armed with the knowledge of what you can naturally bring to a situation and of which organizations are of most interest, begin the process of creating "warm introductions" to stakeholders in the organizations you have targeted. The majority of senior executive changes are facilitated by someone affiliated with the organization, who already knows the successful candidate. So, networking and being intentional about what one wants are far and away the most likely predictors of a successful and fulfilling job change.

There are many potential paths to consider along the way. As noted in the *Harvard Business Review Forethought,* volunteer and board service are powerful starting places. You can also find points of entry through known job postings; for example, one of the Bridgespan Group senior managers read about us online and discovered that she knew one of the partners. She used both channels to find an opportunity with the organization.

Finally, no one should underestimate how time-consuming the search for a new position can be. I like to say, "Looking for a job is a job." Moonlighting on a serious job search is tricky at best.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.