

Charles Kamasaki: Challenging Yourself



Charles Kamasaki, executive vice president of National Council of La Raza (NCLR), has built his entire career at that organization, the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the US. But, as he points out, there have been several times in his career at NCLR where he has had the opportunity to try something completely new. And when the opportunity fits his goals and interests, his approach has always been to jump in wholeheartedly.

Kamasaki describes his career path as a combination of deliberate planning and lucky breaks. For example, his first role with NCLR was at a South Texas-based program, where he specialized in supporting affordable housing construction. During a staff conference call, someone mentioned that the organization needed to send a representative to testify at a state hearing on energy and technology. Although his experience and current job revolved mainly around housing issues, Kamasaki was interested in public policy work, so he volunteered.

Since some of his housing work did involve energy conservation, and since he'd had considerable experience as a public speaker, he felt confident in preparing for the hearing: He read all available material, and picked the brains of NCLR staffers and people at other agencies. Through that experience, he got to know NCLR's public policy staff in Washington, DC.

Soon afterward, he moved to Washington to start work as a policy analyst, and just as he was getting settled in his new post, Congress passed a "once-in-a-lifetime" immigration reform bill. Kamasaki felt strongly that the issue would become important to NCLR's constituents, and he wanted to be the one to lead the organization's lobbying effort. He offered to help, and NCLR's legislative office, which was short-staffed at the time, agreed. Kamasaki read up on all the issues surrounding immigration reform and set up informational meetings with key players from all sides of the issue. And what began as an informal arrangement eventually grew into Kamasaki becoming NCLR's chief lobbyist in the immigration field.

"If you're going to do something well, you have to invest some time, energy, and ego," Kamasaki said of his experiences. "I felt in my gut that when the opportunity came up to represent the organization on

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
P 617 572-2833
F 617 572-2834

New York

112 West 34th St., Suite 1510
New York, NY 10120
P 646 562-8900
F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
P 415 627-1100
F 415 627-4575

immigration reform that this was going to be an important topic. I very consciously tried to learn the field and get to know the people.”

In 1990, Kamasaki was named acting vice president overseeing NCLR’s public policy division, but as he said, he did not immediately master the administrator portion of the new job. In fact, when he first became vice president, he had a bad reputation for missing staff meetings and ignoring budgets and timesheets. Rather than give up what he thought of as the “real work” of lobbying and analyzing public policy, he considered leaving the organization. However, he credits NCLR’s former President Raul Yzaguirre for helping him see that senior leadership was the right fit for his talents and interests, and that the organizational side of the job was vitally important.

“I credit Raul for saying, gently, ‘I need you to do this,’” Kamasaki said. “I had to step back and think about what the organization really needed. What has motivated me in my career has been that I am trying to accomplish something, to achieve something. In NCLR, I had an organization that was on an upward trajectory, representing a growing and increasingly more important community. I had a choice: Did I want to change my role and advance the mission or was I at heart really a lobbyist who should look for another organization? I chose the former. “

Kamasaki, who is now NCLR’s de facto operations chief, delegated his lobbying responsibilities and took on the challenge of becoming an effective administrator. He studied accounting. He read the entire series of books by management guru Peter Drucker. He studied NCLR’s audits and annual reports. To gain a deeper understanding of how the other parts of the organization worked, he sat down with colleagues and asked them about their work and read their reports. Someone who once could justify spending almost every minute of his time outside the office in meetings with Hill or agency staffers had evolved into an insider.

“It’s a common thought that people don’t change: once a widget counter, always a widget counter,” Kamasaki said. “But if you challenge yourself, you can get over some big obstacles.”

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. [Sign up for Bridgestar’s monthly newsletter, *Leaders Matter*](#), to receive the latest articles on nonprofit careers, recruiting, and leadership.