



## On-the-Job Development Opportunities for Nonprofit Staff

Nonprofits must get the most out of their people if they are to create the greatest impact for their beneficiaries, and developing leadership and management talent is a critical piece of the equation.

“Good leaders motivate individuals to give their best, but great ones also figure out how to develop their people to their full capabilities—so they can and will give even more,” explained Bridgespan Group Partner Kirk Kramer, in a recent interview. However, offering development opportunities can be challenging for many nonprofit organizations. In fact, in a Bridgespan Group survey, nonprofits ranked their ability to provide development and growth opportunities to employees as their fourth greatest management weakness overall<sup>1</sup>.

Budget constraints often are cited as a reason why nonprofits fall short on professional development, but Kramer notes that they shouldn’t be holding organizations back. According to Kramer, nonprofits should look in-house for development opportunities, regardless of the economic climate. “Even if we weren’t having tough budget times, nonprofits ought to be finding these creative ways of doing more on-the-job development and using external training to supplement it,” Kramer said, noting that in-house programs allow organizations to provide staff with real-time coaching, counseling, and support that can improve the training’s effectiveness.

There are many ways that nonprofits can provide on-the-job opportunities for their staff to develop and grow. To learn about those development opportunities, Bridgespan surveyed nonprofit leaders who participated in a recent leadership program through Bank of America’s Neighborhood Excellence Initiative®, a program recognizing leadership and service, (NEI) —about how they provided development opportunities to their employees. “The survey responses made it clear to us that the leaders we work with through NEI aren’t only interested in building their own leadership skills but also are very interested in strengthening their teams,” said Kerry Sullivan, president of the Bank of America Charitable Foundation. “We’ve heard from nonprofit leaders participating in the NEI leadership training that they bring ideas and materials back to their staff, providing a ripple effect of growth and development in the nonprofit sector.”

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<sup>1</sup> See “Data Point: Employee Development a Weakness in Many Nonprofits”

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Nonprofit leaders' responses to the survey, in fact, surfaced myriad creative approaches that could serve as models for other organizations. Below, we categorized and synthesized their responses under six key skill areas: team leadership and management; communication; external relations; fundraising; financial and business economics; and project management. By sharing these methods, we hope to inspire others to get creative with their own in-house solutions to professional development challenges.

## **Team Leadership and Management**

The nonprofits we surveyed provided numerous opportunities for their staff to develop team leadership and management skills within their organizations. One of the most commonly used methods is putting staff in charge of organizing meetings and events. This included leading monthly staff meetings; participating in annual or strategic planning with board members and organization leadership; and identifying organizational challenges and leading working sessions with other managers to address them.

For example, consider The Cara Program, a Chicago-based job training and placement provider for individuals affected by poverty and homelessness. "Typically, with many organizations like ours, there are fewer opportunities for traditional vertical advancement, and therefore, limited seats for 'people managers,'" explained Maria Kim, The Cara Program's vice president of resource development and strategic initiatives. "Because of this, we have an obligation to help our employees experience advancement in unconventional ways."

At The Cara Program, employees plan and lead staff meetings, including facilitating brainstorming, team building, and ice-breaker activities. One example is the organization's staff development seminar series. Once each quarter, staff from multiple departments select the topic of greatest interest across the entire organization and orchestrate an intensive professional development day. They leverage external subject experts, as well as create their own home-grown courses. "Staff develop their creativity, capacity to facilitate, ability to negotiate with external parties, ability to create budgets, and essentially, engage in mini-event planning," said Kim.

Another innovative approach the survey revealed was allowing leaders-in-training to assume responsibility for managing and training junior staff. A variation on that approach was overseeing interns who were assigned to the organization through training programs (e.g., college preparatory high schools or information technology training programs).

A number of the survey respondents said they also develop team leadership and management skills using training and apprenticeship programs. These approaches for developing promising staff members included having them participate in leadership or management training run by the organization's senior managers; assigning them to support specific board committees; and having them work on committees and task forces outside of their regular job (i.e., a program manager participating on a human resources committee). One organization arranges once-a-month "shadow days," during which up-and-coming leaders spend time with senior executives to learn leadership skills through direct observation. Another organization rotates staff into temporary leadership and management roles when their assigned managers are on vacation.

Mary Riedel, president and Chief Executive Officer of Women in Distress in Broward County, a Fort Lauderdale, FL-based domestic violence center, said her organization tries to identify high-potential staff members and give them a "stretch" assignment that is out of their usual scope of responsibility. For example, the director of outreach services, who had previously worked in financial services, is working with the board chair to help create the organization's new strategic plan. "She has great strategic thinking skills and a financial background," Riedel said. "But in her direct service role, she has had limited exposure to the board. This is a critical assignment that will help us develop a really good strategic plan and also give her experience in a different arena."

Riedel said her agency has had a unique opportunity to provide a wide range of in-house professional development during the last two years because it has been planning for a major expansion this spring that will double its physical size and expand its programs. Line staff members have helped plan budgets and design floor plans for the new facility. A high-potential member of the development team has served as the project's capital campaign manager. "Rather than going out and hiring a consultant, we decided to do things in-house," Riedel said. "It's been good for us and good for the employees. The agency gets someone who knows, at the ground level, the services we're providing. And the individuals get to expand their horizons."

## Communication

One of the most obvious ways for staff to develop communication skills is to present at and organize meetings. The organizations that were surveyed provide their most promising staff members with a myriad of such opportunities, including:

- Presenting at monthly staff meetings;
- Presenting status of team or division metrics at organization-wide meetings;

- Presenting new programming and/or other updates at board meetings (some had emerging leaders from different departments alternate doing these presentations);
- Presenting topics in which they have expertise at organization-wide meetings; and
- Providing a short “training” in board meetings on program-relevant topics.

Another effective approach to building communication skills is to have staff members prepare written materials, such as submissions for internal newsletters, portions of proposals for government and private funding, portions of business contracts, speeches for more senior executives in the organization, or sections of the annual report.

At several organizations, emerging leaders organize activities that encourage a blend of teamwork and communication across departments. For example, one nonprofit has key staff from across the organization participate in communications training that is conducted either by more experienced staff or by local volunteer consultants that it lines up through staff contacts or local colleges.

The Children’s Center, an early intervention and childcare organization with three locations in Virginia, provides regular communication training to staff. All 130 of the organization’s staff members are on at least one workgroup that meets monthly. Each meeting includes a communication or team-building activity organized by a staff person, followed by a debriefing where the group members discuss the activity and how it may be useful in their work. Barbara Mease, the nonprofit’s executive director, said the activities range from recreational to serious and can take anywhere from five to 20 minutes. “The employees benefit because they have a chance to practice group leadership skills in a safe environment,” said Mease. “We all benefit as we build relationships.”

## External Relations

Being able to serve as the public face of their organization is an important skill for potential nonprofit leaders to develop. Many of the nonprofits Bridgespan interviewed help their potential leaders develop skills in this area by giving them opportunities to represent the organization in a variety of public meetings. For example, some organizations have promising leaders accompany senior executives on outreach and sales opportunities to take notes and observe. Others have junior staff present at events and meetings with external constituents, such as donors and community leaders. Junior staff also may represent the organization in professional or community networks, testify at public meetings on behalf of the organization’s mission or clients, or attend and speak at conferences.

But developing external relationship skills doesn't stop there. The nonprofits surveyed also encouraged employees to participate in numerous other external activities. One assigns staff members to keep colleagues informed about upcoming events that might affect the organization, and to participate when possible; another asks potential leaders to identify and participate in conferences on a regular basis. Still others encourage staff members to serve on the boards of other nonprofit organizations.

At Project Place in Boston, MA, which provides jobs, housing, and skills training to help adults overcome homelessness, Executive Director Suzanne Kenney said direct care staff members are trained and empowered to assume responsibility for their clients' needs "from soup to nuts," and that that experience helps them develop. Kenney said most social service agencies can benefit from empowering line staff to oversee a broader array of client services, though she stressed that inexperienced employees should not be expected to develop leadership skills in jobs requiring expertise in clinical work.

"We have a rather flat hierarchy at Project Place, with line staff providing the direct service to our clients, managers who supervise the staff, and then three senior staff," Kenney explained. "It is natural for us to have those individuals who are working directly with clients, knowing their needs best, to organize a job fair. Our line staff [members] are incredibly motivated." Kenney also noted that the organization first ensures that direct care staff members have internalized the agency's objectives and philosophy and then trains them to manage outreach, employer relations, and provider partnerships relationships. This training often includes forming alliances with other organizations to run shared job fairs that focus on job training and employment of low-income and homeless individuals.

## Fundraising

Fundraising is the lifeblood of many nonprofit organizations, and the leaders we surveyed have found several innovative ways to help staff members develop this important skill. For example, many organizations get staff involved in proposal writing. This can include participating in drafting portions of proposals for government and private funding; reading and providing feedback on proposal drafts; or drafting portions of business contracts.

Mease said The Children's Center develops grant writers internally by giving staff members opportunities to prepare background for specific sections of a grant, which is then incorporated into the final draft, or by providing first drafts to a more senior staffer. "Often, new grant writers need to be directed and re-directed to actually look at what the question [in the Request for Proposals] is asking," Mease said. "They also need to be reminded to put the most important information in the beginning. Don't force a foundation staff member to search your document trying to figure out what you want from them!"

At many of the nonprofits, potential leaders also participate, to some degree, in fundraising events. For example, they may join in meetings with potential funders or take the lead presenting to and following up with funders. Some organizations assign staff to cultivate future funders or participate in a call with a major donor to learn the fundamentals of major gift solicitation. Others ask key staff members to participate in internal fundraising meetings and to provide input on strategy and tactics. Some nonprofits described ways staff members can participate directly in donor management. For example, one has given key employees responsibility for coaching a group of volunteers helping with the organization's annual campaign. Another has put potential leaders in charge of developing and implementing a plan that assures donors and volunteers feel appreciated for their involvement.

### **Financial and Business Economics**

Nonprofits have many opportunities to get potential leaders involved in budget-related activities that can hone their financial skills. In this area, ideas that the nonprofits we surveyed have found effective include developing budgets for grants or for the staff member's own department; participating in the annual budget process/financial reviews; participating in the ongoing management of budget line items throughout the year; participating in annual audits (including fiscal, government, or insurance); participating on a board finance committee; reviewing and giving input on budgets of other departments; and engaging in financial updates at monthly staff meetings.

Riedel said Women in Distress of Broward County takes a team approach with a selected number of grants so that program staff can be involved in budget development. She said this approach has provided benefits even beyond developing financial skills. "There's natural division that needs to be bridged between the people who provide direct service and the people on the business side of the organization," she said. "Both sides really care about the mission, but they provide expertise in different ways." By working as a team to write grants and meet with funders, Riedel said the development and direct care staff have come to better appreciate what the other side brings to the mission.

A number of nonprofits we surveyed said they also boost their staff's financial skills by providing books and external training materials on how to read, interpret, and use data from financial statements. One also has key staff members shadow a finance analyst on a task or project to learn the fiscal management process and skills.

## Project Management

One of the ways employees can gain project management skills is to spearhead or help with an internal initiative. At The Cara Program, for example, promising staffers have overhauled the organization's website, implemented a customer relationship management system, created a social-return-on-investment model, and revamped the organization's training structure.

Other organizations said they have assigned staff members to serve as project leaders for their annual training programs, fundraisers, or community events sponsored by the organizations. Some nonprofits put staff in charge of planning and facilitating quarterly company-wide training/learning seminars. Others also have asked key staff members to engage board and alumni in focus groups on new potential program designs.

The Cara Program's Kim said the best professional development programs are ones that allow workers throughout the organization to stretch and grow in their jobs. A good example of this is her organization's ad hoc business continuity planning committee, which was led by two front-line employees working closely with senior management and leveraged front-line employees from all departments to chronicle process and escalation procedures in the event of business disruption.

Said Kim, "We know the success of our organization should not rely heavily on a few leaders at the top puppeteering the operation, but truly through distributed leadership throughout the organization—where all employees feel accountable and empowered to act on the net outcomes of the organization."

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