

Sandra Timmons: From COO to Chief Executive

Position: President, A Better Chance

Start Date: May, 2003

Education: BA, Business/Economics, University of Pittsburgh; Master of Science in Public Policy, Carnegie Mellon University

Previous For-Profit Experience: Marketing, finance, and corporate planning positions at Honeywell and IBM

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Chief Operating Officer, Girls Incorporated; Chief of Staff to the President, the College Board

Organization Information: National organization that identifies and recruits academically talented and motivated students of color and guides them toward a variety of educational opportunities; founded in 1963; based in New York City; \$3 million budget

Sandra Timmons didn't jump from chief operating officer (COO) to chief executive officer (CEO); she was pushed. After five years as COO of Girls Incorporated, she reluctantly interviewed for the top job at another nonprofit, largely as a courtesy to a colleague. The recruiter managing the search was very interested in her and encouraged her to consider the opportunity seriously. Timmons recalled, "[The recruiter] said 'Okay, you're having a good time as the number-two person in a national organization, but are you going to do that for 25 more years?'" The recruiter was successful in persuading Timmons to consider the position, which she eventually was offered and accepted. She became president of A Better Chance in 2003.

Timmons started her career at Honeywell, in a management-training program that exposed her to many aspects of both the business and the nonprofit worlds. "Honeywell was a good corporate citizen in Minneapolis. Whenever there was a mentoring program or a local event, we would participate. I represented the company at a lot of those opportunities. My first notion of being in the nonprofit sector came from doing that kind of thing on evenings and weekends. I liked what the organizations were doing and I liked the people."

From Honeywell, Timmons went to the College Board, first as special assistant to the president for financial and strategic planning and then as chief of staff—a job with similar responsibilities to a COO position. The College Board is a nonprofit membership association comprising school systems, universities, and colleges, but it is also a business that derives significant revenue from standardized testing. Timmons said, "It's not a nonprofit organization in the way you think of nonprofit organizations

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traditionally. It has elements of both an association and a corporation.” She saw the chief of staff job as “a great role in which to learn and view up close the kinds of things CEOs deal with, like board governance, policy and legal issues, and staffing.”

While at the College Board, Timmons volunteered with Girls Incorporated, a national nonprofit youth development organization. One of the staff people with whom she worked told her that the organization was looking for a COO to run the national operations so the president could focus more on fundraising, organizational visibility, and other external issues. Timmons asked for a job description, liked it, applied, and was hired.

In the COO position at Girls Incorporated, Timmons oversaw programs, research, training, affiliate relations, technology, and human resources. Finance, development, and communications reported directly to the president. She was responsible for managing 60 percent of the organization’s budget and staff.

Timmons had worked there almost two years when the president announced she was leaving. “The president came to me and said, ‘You’re in the COO chair. Do you want to be considered for this job?’ I didn’t.” Timmons didn’t feel that she was ready to take on the responsibility of that position permanently, but she agreed to serve as interim president while the board searched for a successor. She saw the interim position as a good opportunity to try out the job. When a new president was hired, Timmons went back to managing the organization internally but continued to do some board work, fundraising, and long-term organizational planning.

Together, she and the new president wrote a business plan and raised more than \$10 million dollars to implement it. “This was a turning point for me because those were dollars I had helped usher in, starting when I was acting president, so this said to the outside world that I could raise the money.” It was around this point that she was asked to interview for the position of president at A Better Chance and was eventually persuaded to take the job.

Reflecting on her choice to move from COO to CEO, Timmons pointed out that this was not the only viable path for her. “I could be the COO of a larger organization and be really happy.” She reported that while she has enjoyed both positions, they present different challenges and fit her skills and interests in different ways. “I am inherently a COO because I enjoy being in the nitty-gritty, the day-to-day. As CEO, you become the front person, especially now with the emphasis on fundraising, media, and profile. I’m fine with that, but because it takes me outside of my comfort zone, it’s much more effort for me, in comparison with the programmatic and operational work. My natural skills make me a good fit for the

COO position, but people will continue to think of me in the CEO role because of what I have done and what I can do.”

During her first two years running A Better Chance, the organization grew its programs by 20 percent while cutting costs by 27 percent. It improved and streamlined many of its functions, and met a number of strategic objectives ahead of schedule. Timmons said, “In this job, my interests, skills, and experience came together in a comprehensive whole. When I sit in this chair, all of my past experiences at Honeywell, the College Board, and Girls Incorporated come together, and the whole is really greater than the sum of its parts.”

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