

Asking the Right Questions About Leadership Effectiveness



Nicki Roth



Gavin Fenn-Smith

Nonprofit leadership development faces challenges unique to the sector, say Nicki Roth and Gavin Fenn-Smith, founders of [Saroga](#), an organization dedicated to developing nonprofit leaders and their staff. Here they

discuss Saroga, its leadership model, the questions leaders should ask to be more effective, and an upcoming book that they hope will help change the conversation leaders are having around the challenges they are facing.

Tell us about your nonprofit, Saroga. Why did you start it and what do you do?

Nicki Roth: [Gavin Fenn-Smith and I] both come out of long histories in the for-profit consulting world, focusing on organizational effectiveness and leadership development. Coincidentally we were both spending a lot of time in the nonprofit world and had independently come to the conclusions that the need in nonprofits for leadership development was huge and that the ordinarily great approaches and tools we had used for years in the corporate world simply did not fit well in the nonprofit space.

Gavin Fenn-Smith: The nonprofit context is quite different. There's a high level of complexity and our view was, "How do we translate the work that we've done over many years into the nonprofit space so that it's still high quality and at a price point they can afford and within the limited time nonprofit leaders have available." We started to have a series of conversations and ultimately decided to combine forces to create the nonprofit Saroga. From the beginning our intention has been to create a learning experience for nonprofit leaders that is built off of models, resources, tools, and approaches that better fit the unique context of nonprofits. To that end we have developed a foundational leadership model that is specific to nonprofits and is the underpinning of our services and products.

Describe the Saroga leadership model.

Gavin: The Saroga leadership model outlines the attributes and the characteristics that we would expect a great nonprofit leader to show strength in. The model starts with the notion of passion, because clearly, in the nonprofit space, being able to touch the heart of an employee, touch the hearts of those you serve, is essential. So, passion is important and is at the core of our model, but that's insufficient for building an effective organization in the nonprofit space. We think

The Saroga Leadership Model

The Saroga leadership model outlines the attributes and the characteristics of a great nonprofit leader. The model starts with the notion of **Passion**, "because in the nonprofit space, being able to touch the heart of an employee, touch the hearts of those you serve, is essential," says Saroga's Gavin Fenn-Smith. But just having passion is insufficient for building an effective nonprofit. Many nonprofit leaders tend to focus on the mission and the passion, but neglect some of the other areas. "Without those other areas, you can't build a strong organization," says Fenn-Smith.

At the other end of the model, there is **Impact**, which is about creating a better future for those you serve. But in between Passion and Impact, there are five characteristics critical to effective leadership.

1. **Detect** focuses on analytical skills, creative skills, conceptual skills, skills that help leaders be strategic. There are many moving parts in a nonprofit, so a nonprofit leader needs to be able to see these moving parts and to ask the right questions, so "there are a set of attributes around perception, integration of information, and so on that make up Detect," Fenn-Smith says.
2. **Weave** is about pulling the parts of the organization together. It is about thinking about structure and management practices. "We call it Weave, because in the complex nonprofit context, that's the way we see it: it is being able to weave or stitch together these parts, to create a work environment that is productive, that is the right work environment for that nonprofit," he says.
3. The next element is **Bridge**. Nonprofit success is highly dependent on relationships: how nonprofit leaders build relationships with funders, with team members, with those communities they're trying to serve, even with local governments. With multiple constituents, it's very important for nonprofit leaders to have very strong interpersonal skills and to be able to build strong relationships and bridges between them.
4. The next attribute is **Grow**, which is about individual leaders being curious and being open to learn but also being critical. "Grow is about being able to cultivate other people, being able to grow, to coach," says Fenn-Smith.
5. Finally, we have **Flex**. In the complex nonprofit environment, nonprofit leaders can wear many hats during one day. "You can find an ED photocopying something in the morning, attending an after school program in the afternoon, and then holding a fundraiser in the evening," he says. "Therefore, being able to flex across these different circumstances, being effective and true to oneself in all these different situations, is quite a skill for nonprofit leaders."

many nonprofit leaders tend to focus on the mission and the passion, but neglect some of the other areas. Without those other areas, we don't think you can build a strong organization. Then at the other end of the model, we have Impact, which is obviously about creating a better future for a community, those people that the organization is serving. Between Passion and Impact come a number of attributes important to strong leadership: the ability to Detect, Weave, Bridge, Grow, and Flex. (Learn more about the model in the above sidebar "The Saroga Leadership Model.")

What challenges are nonprofit leaders facing today that speak to the need for them to have strengths in these attribute areas?

Nicki: There is much more conversation going on now about the need for more prepared leaders and the development needs for the pipeline of leaders on the ascent. Our clients are being charged to manage accountability, measure impact, and scale their efforts. Many of them have not been exposed to those leadership challenges before. Other clients are already successful or are hitting a growth moment where the organization is getting more complex. These situations raise new organizational leadership questions related to the Detect, Weave and Grow aspects of our model.

More seasoned nonprofit leaders have another concern: they're realizing that they and their managers don't have the skill sets the organization currently needs. They don't have effective managers or staff with skills that match the present needs. Many people join nonprofits because they have passion around the mission. But that's not enough. You still need orderly systems and processes and clarity about what skill sets are required to do the work. Leaders are becoming aware that they have people in the organization who are just not a good fit. We're spending more time with leaders who are taking a hard look at assessing their people and asking for our help to create clear performance standards.

Saroga is publishing a new book on leadership development and effectiveness. How will it help nonprofit leaders become more effective and better prepared to meet today's challenges?

Gavin: In the book, we share a number of situations that nonprofit leaders are asking questions about: How do we improve funding? How do we increase the impact of our programs? Should we create new programs? These are the traditional queries for leaders and boards. There is nothing wrong with this approach, but we want to change the conversation. We believe that nonprofits need to focus fundamentally on developing effective leadership and organizational capacity. From a position of stronger leadership, answers to the standard questions will yield different solutions.

Drawing from our work with nonprofits we tell stories of the typical challenges they're facing. We focus on the avenues leaders can take to address these challenges by asking a different set of questions: What do I need to learn as a leader to do this differently? What does the organization need to do differently in terms of leadership capacity so that we can solve these issues for the longer term? It is meant to help a nonprofit leader see a different path through some of the challenges where the focus is on learning new leadership skills rather than tactical problem solving.

Nicki: We hope that people who read the book will recognize themselves and their organizations reflected in the stories. Whether your organization is at an inflection point of growth or hit a trouble spot or has a new leader, any of these situations can cause greater complexity and some reexamination. These moments in organizations beg many questions. We suggest that the best answers loop back to incredibly effective leadership.

What types of questions should nonprofit leaders be asking to become better focused on their own effectiveness?

Gavin: It's a matter of asking some additional, different questions: What can I do differently? What can I learn differently? And what kind of capacity can we build here so that we have sustainability over the long term to address the other issues? Organizations are full of people, behaviors, and complexity, and that requires a certain set of skills and understanding from these leaders.

One specific question we think leaders should be asking themselves is, "Do I want to remain a subject matter expert? If I want to build a long-term sustainable organization then I need to move beyond being an expert." The leader then needs to ask, "What do I need to learn?" In our view, this is called learning intelligence: the desire to self-reflect, the desire to learn about one's self, the desire to improve around the concept of leadership. Those leaders who have that are going to be, in our view, more successful in building sustainable organizations.

Nicki: When you think about many of the nonprofit founders their self-image is, "I know something about this particular issue and I have immense passion to make a difference." They see themselves as change agents but not necessarily as leaders of organizations. If you look at corporations and the people who are executives, somewhere early in their careers they said, "I want to lead something. I want to build something and lead it." The question for nonprofit leaders is, "Can I think of myself as a leader of these people and this organization?" In other words, can they expand their identities beyond their comfortable expertise.

Gavin: Sometimes you have to take a step back before you can take two steps forward. What we mean is that you need to examine yourself and your capacity and willingness to learn new skills. When you explore those questions you will find some individuals who are in the wrong roles, including founders who are unsuited

to growing the agency. In our book we're helping leaders take a step back and think about their strengths and gaps in leading their organizations.

We have a saying at Saroga. Not taking a close look at effective leadership in nonprofits is like leaving money on the table. The multiplier effect of fantastic leadership is greater and more sustainable impact on your cause. In the end, that's the whole purpose of a nonprofit.

BOSTON

2 Copley Place, 7th Floor
Suite 3700B
Boston, MA 02116
Tel: 617 572-2833

NEW YORK

112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510
New York, NY 10120
Tel: 646 562-8900

SAN FRANCISCO

465 California St., 11th Fl.
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415 627-1100

