

Attracting—and Benefiting from—Sector Switchers

What is the best way to identify, evaluate, and integrate “sector-switchers” (individuals whose experience comes from outside the nonprofit sector) into a nonprofit organization?

That’s a tough question to answer, but often, hearing about others’ experiences can help. Bridgespan Group Partner Wayne Luke shared one such story—about a high-profile search to find the right job candidates for an historic new venture—with attendees of the annual Non-Profit Human Resources Conference in Washington, DC, on October 4, 2009.

It all began on December 22, 1958, Luke said, when the NASA Langley Research Center sent out what was essentially a nonprofit job posting titled, “Invitation to Apply for Position of Research Astronaut.” The job offered a starting salary of \$8,330 to \$12,778, depending upon qualifications.

“Welcome to the story of the Mercury Seven astronauts, a prime example of sector switchers,” said Luke. “Namely, individuals with a collection of experiences, passions, and competencies who, despite rigid selection and qualification processes, chose to transfer their skills into a completely different and totally foreign environment focused on an incredible mission for the betterment of mankind.”

The Mercury program’s goals were to achieve orbital flight, to investigate the capabilities of man in space, and to safely recover both astronauts and spacecraft. The [NASA job posting](#) described training and familiarization programs leading to specialized knowledge and skills. To qualify for the jobs, individuals would have to participate in a variety of tests and drills that would be used to determine how the human body might react to the extremes of the missions, and to design systems to better accommodate humans. The tests would also help the employer develop targeted assignments that would make use of the astronauts’ own special competencies to benefit the overall program. The job posting documents detailed education, age, and height requirements, noting that applicants had to be male and United States citizens. It also specified professional work or graduate study deemed critical to the task.

Not to be overlooked was section D of the posting, which said: “Applicants must have had a substantial and significant amount of experience, which has clearly demonstrated three required characteristics:

- A. Willingness to accept hazards comparable to or greater than those encountered in modern research airplane flights;
- B. Capacity to tolerate rigorous and severe environmental conditions;

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C. Ability to react adequately under conditions of extreme stress or emergency.”

The Mercury program attracted a broad pool of 508 applicants, which was whittled down to 110 finalists who were then given a battery of physical, psychological, and team-oriented tests. On April 9, 1959, the final Mercury Seven astronauts were introduced to a waiting world: Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Virgil Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, Jr., and Deke Slayton.

Luke zeroed in on the experiences of Alan Shepard, Jr., the first American ever to command a mission in space. Graduating from the Naval Academy on June 7, 1944, the day after D-Day in Europe, Shepard served for one year on a destroyer in the Pacific. After the war, he served in a variety of naval flight squadrons and then took part in experimental test and development programs for high-altitude scientific research and aircraft design purposes.

Shepard quickly established himself as a team player on the Mercury Program, said Luke. He didn't just focus on preparations for piloting a mission; he used his experience with naval ships and operations to focus on the tracking range and recovery efforts of the capsules. On February 21, 1961, Shepard was named the prime pilot for Mercury's first mission. He completed the first successful NASA manned space mission on May 5, 1961.

As the Mercury Program continued and the design phases of the Gemini Program began, Luke said, Shepard served as a capsule communicator for multiple flights and was named the pilot for the final "extended duration" Mercury flight in mid-1963, although that flight never took place in deference to the priorities of men and material necessary to initiate Gemini. During training for the first Gemini flight, Shepard was diagnosed with Meniere's syndrome, a disorienting, dizziness- and nausea-causing inner ear disease, and he was pulled from the flight rotation. Not to be deterred, Shepard became the chief of the Astronaut Office responsible for monitoring the coordination, scheduling, and control over all activities involving the astronauts. In early 1969, Shepard underwent an operation on his ear that rectified his inner ear problem and he returned to full flight status. His final spaceflight was on January 31, 1971, on Apollo 14, during which he planted his feet firmly on the surface of the moon.

"So, what's to be learned from the Mercury Seven?" Luke asked. "More specifically, what can we draw from the story of these first Americans in space that applies to our ability to identify, attract, engage, and benefit from sector switchers?" Luke suggested nonprofits consider the following five points when attracting and engaging the best candidates for their organizations.

1. Do a great, objective job of understanding and describing your organization and what it takes to be successful

Organizations should do their best to characterize themselves honestly and transparently, as NASA did in its job posting. What skills are required for success and where are those skills likely to be demonstrated outside your own environment? Be truthful and honest with candidates; don't hesitate to ask why they are interested and what about their backgrounds makes them relevant. And don't allow personalities and presence to solely carry the day. Test pilots have egos combined with excellent flight skills, but NASA was discerning about who would operate in a setting where it was less about any one person and more about the success of the program. The right mindset, the right behaviors, and the appreciation for the team will always be greater predictors of success than the functional depth of an individual's toolkit. As Luke put it, "Culture trumps competency."

2. The sector switcher pool is large; be selective, and prepare the way

Armed with an understanding of what's required to be successful (i.e., what do your heroes look like in the organization and what combination of their own skills and the organizational environment helped to make them successful?), organizations should make sure they choose wisely on the basis of criteria deemed to be critical to their missions. What skills and competencies map generically to the job to be done and how have those factors manifested themselves in the candidate's past? In the case of the Mercury Seven, all seven astronauts had test pilot experience, and they all possessed superior flight records and aviation accomplishments. Once chosen, organizations should inform and equip the sector switcher with the knowledge, contacts, and exposures necessary to properly orient, familiarize, equip, and "launch" them.

3. Listen, experiment, and adapt

Those doing the hiring should think about how their environments are changing and what the realities of their organizations are as they look ahead. Is the atmosphere or culture likely to change as the organization grows or as the demands of the mission evolve? If so, how? Nonprofits should be willing to allow individuals new to the sector to try new things; a fresh perspective might be just what an organization needs. Consider John Glenn's suggestion to keep part of his retro-rocket package attached during re-entry. His idea was born of concern that the head shield had been damaged during launch, and he felt that the rocket packs could provide additional insulation. Glenn's suggestion was novel, it had never been considered, and it worked.

Sector switchers need to adapt to the norms and beliefs of the organizations they join, Luke said, but organizations also need to adapt to sector switchers: “Encourage sector switchers to plow new ground; your organization will be the better for it.”

4. Big ideas require intelligent risks

Less than 12 months before Shepard’s first flight, two Redstone missiles had failed to launch successfully and had exploded on the gantry. However, this didn’t kill the program. NASA learned from its failures and learned how to assimilate the energy and talent of sector switchers into a program while being willing to embrace an acceptable “window of risk.” Luke said very few sector switchers will be attracted to a setting where the blueprints are done, the important decisions have all been made, and all they need to do is show up to execute a game plan. Sector switchers want to advance the cause and they want to go places the organization might have never considered, he said. Yet he noted that the term “intelligent” risk implies a willingness to work with others in order to avoid past mistakes and to elevate the likelihood of success in a new direction or frontier.

5. It’s not about the money, it’s about the mission

The Mercury Seven embraced the mission of NASA, not the money they would be paid, Luke said. He said most sector switchers are like that, but beware: Had the Mercury Seven not been able to adequately provide for their families and maintain at least a modicum of what they had established as a lifestyle, the focus they needed to become flight-ready would likely have been hard, if not impossible, to maintain. Even they were subject to what Luke called the “Honey Test,” i.e., the reality of going home to one’s significant other and saying, “Honey, guess what I’m about to do and here is what it means for us.”

Luke said it was Shepard’s skills and his flair for teamwork—along with the skills and traits of his Mercury Seven colleagues—that paved the way for the monumental accomplishment of putting a man on the moon. He noted that the Mercury Seven largely stayed on at NASA long after their active flight days and served in roles to advance the readiness and skills of future pilots. Indeed, Luke said, the early astronaut testing successfully identified a group of heroes who sought to deploy their skills toward the achievement of a grand collective mission.

The Mercury Seven were all huge difference makers and all deserving of their own story, Luke said. He summed up by asking the conference attendees, “So, what’s your mission? Chances are the energy, the adaptability, the fresh perspectives, and the demonstrated generic skills of sector switchers intelligently

selected to join your organizations will enable you to reach new levels of impact and possibility. Heck, you might even make it to the moon.”

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