

## Critical Steps to Getting Started in Leadership Development

If our [research](#) is any guide, many nonprofits recognize that leadership development is an organizational imperative but struggle with making it a priority. Over the past several months, The Bridgespan Group has posted articles explaining briefly a few simple actions that nearly any nonprofit can take to implement a systematic process of leadership development. Across five articles focusing on [engaging the CEO and senior leaders](#), [understanding future needs](#), [developing future leaders](#), [hiring externally](#), and [measuring and monitoring](#), all adapted from our guide, *Plan A: How Successful Nonprofits Develop Their Future Leaders*, we have tried to make the case that these steps are worth the time, effort, and energy.

We recognize that the job of putting in place these five processes can seem overwhelming, but done within the regular day-to-day context of your organization's work, they can be successfully implemented to help you fill your organization's leadership pipeline. So where do you start? If you have some activities underway, what are the most critical steps to take? From what we've seen others do, here are some suggestions for getting started and making progress:

1. **Take our Leadership Development diagnostic, accessible online at [www.bridgespan.org/LeadershipDiagnostic](http://www.bridgespan.org/LeadershipDiagnostic).** It will help you identify the leadership development activities you already have in place and think about how to step up to the next level.
2. **Add a personal- and organizational-development objective to the annual goals of each of your direct reports.** Assuming you have an annual goal-setting and performance-review process, build on it—don't create something new. Start by telling senior team members that it is important that they develop as individuals and that you'll help each of them do so. Also tell members that you'll include among their annual goals one related to their development, and then make it clear that you expect them to do the same for their direct reports. If you are just getting started, have the senior team focus on only a couple of its staff to begin with, to keep the process manageable. Once the process is under way, make sure your leaders extend development goal-setting to other staffers. This starts the flywheel spinning and starts to create a culture of development. To keep things moving forward:
  - a. Meet with each of your direct reports twice a year to discuss progress against their goals. Don't create something new. You probably have review meetings set up during the year to discuss progress against other goals; capitalize on these meetings by adding progress against development goals to the agenda. And hold your people accountable. If they haven't met their development goals, factor that into their annual performance evaluations. That's a powerful way for you to make clear that development is part of a leader's job.
  - b. Be ready to coach and counsel those struggling with developing their staff. Role-play a goal-setting discussion. Follow up after they've had discussions with staff

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to see how it went and to provide advice for the future. You might bring in an outside coach to run a session for your entire senior team on this topic.

3. **Gather your direct reports for a once-a-year offsite (at your house, at a board member's office—anywhere but the office) to discuss the performance and potential of their direct reports.** You can use this simple [performance-potential matrix tool](#) to help guide your thinking. You might consider scheduling this gathering in the middle of the year, when you have accumulated a good bit of data but can focus most of your attention on potential, rather than past performance.
  - a. Start the discussion with a perspective on where you see the organization going and what the likely leadership needs will be in three years or so. Gather feedback from your senior team. Develop a common view of the key positions you'll likely need to fill and the skills and capabilities they require.
  - b. Make sure to talk about the criteria for ratings. What constitutes "high potential," for example? If possible, calibrate your judgments by first discussing a few individuals whom your leadership team knows well. Once you've established a rough set of standards and benchmarks, have your senior team plot their direct reports on the performance-potential matrix. Focus discussion on the outliers. Who stand out clearly as future leaders? Where do you face problems? Pick a small number of future leaders to focus on for development discussions, and charge each senior leader with the development of a plan for them.
  - c. You'll get better at this each time you do it. Before long, you'll be talking about more staff and about how to move individuals from the upper left to the upper right of the performance-potential matrix. You'll increase the number of individuals whom senior leaders should focus on from a few to many.
4. **Add leadership development to the board agenda at least once a year.** Rest assured, people will take notice—and not just your board members. Everyone will get the message that leadership development isn't just important, it's board-worthy. With your senior leaders in the room, talk about the people whom they've identified as future leaders. Tell the board what you are doing to develop them. In executive session, show the board your Plan A—your nonprofit's assessment of its future leadership needs and how you plan on meeting them. And don't keep it a secret. Make sure your direct reports know that the board has seen your Plan A, and that you'd like them to prepare a Plan A for their areas of responsibility. You may want to present their plans to the board.
5. **Keep the development effort going and growing.** Make sure formal development plans are part of the review process; once you have the process under way then you can add more tools. As you better understand your future leadership gaps, upgrade your external hiring processes. Set more ambitious goals. Measure, monitor, learn, and improve.

And don't expect perfection. As we've said, we recognize that you have a difficult task before you, especially given the time and resource constraints that nonprofits face. We hope the tips presented here and the steps covered in the full guide will help make it easier, if not easy.

Another point we've made more than once is that leadership development really begins with a commitment from the CEO, whose role as chief talent officer is vital to the entire leadership development undertaking. But to take root in any organization, leadership development needs consistent, *persistent* engagement from all its chief stewards: board members, senior leaders, and line managers. Together with the CEO, they're jointly responsible for making leadership development a part of your organization's everyday business. And that means implementing the

steps described in this guide in a manner that suits your organization's unique characteristics and culture. We strongly believe that the results—in the form of a stronger, more sustainable organization that's better equipped to pursue its mission—will justify the effort.