

# CEO Perspectives: BRAC USA's Donella Rapier on Transitioning to the CEO Role



Donella Rapier,  
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As president and CEO of BRAC USA, the US-based affiliate of the NGO BRAC, Donella works alongside international leaders who are striving to end poverty through diverse interventions that range from education to microfinance, health care to gender justice and empowerment, and more.

In a recent conversation with [Viewcrest Advisors' Founder](#) and former Bridgespan Partner Kathleen Yazbak, Donella reflects on her first year as leader of BRAC USA, highlights what has been most helpful, and offers advice to other CEOs who may be embarking on their own transitions.

## **Kathleen Yazbak: How did you prepare for your transition from chief development and administrative officer at Accion to president and CEO of BRAC USA?**

**Donella Rapier:** When my good friend Michael Watkins heard I was taking on this role, he urged me to re-read his book *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster*. I would heartily recommend it to anyone making a significant leadership transition. He starts off the book with a number of pitfalls managers encounter during transitions. These are important reminders, even for those of us who have made successful transitions before. Re-reading the book also helped me better structure my plans for this first year.

## **In the C-Suite you partnered with CEOs, so you had a sense of what the role would entail. But what was it really like once you stepped in?**

I've been surprised that it hasn't felt much different. In each of my last four roles, I've been the lead of my function, reporting to someone who doesn't really share that functional expertise. For instance, as CFO at Harvard Business School, I was reporting to a dean who had a technology and operations background. He wasn't a finance person, so he looked to me to craft the financial plans for the school and tell him what he needed to know. As I've moved more into fundraising, I've been advising CEOs about whom to meet with and when, and how to ask for a gift, while also building donor relationships myself. I've had

substantial autonomy as a department head and in building my own teams, so I've learned a ton about managing teams and people. Because of these experiences, being CEO doesn't actually feel too different from my previous roles.

**Because of timing, you didn't have the opportunity to overlap with your predecessor. How did you make that work?**

I met recently with a CEO of another nonprofit and his successor at the NGO Leaders Forum. They had a few months of overlap and I felt somewhat envious. I have had some overlap in past transitions, for example, when I became vice president for Alumni Affairs & Development at Harvard University, which was incredibly helpful. That said, in general, I've found it isn't pivotal, because usually I've been brought in on a change agenda. As in the case of joining BRAC USA, I relied on everyone else in the organization: staff, board members, leaders of affiliated organizations, even some former staff members. I've basically talked to anyone and everyone about their history with BRAC.

One of the things that really helped early on in my current role was a leadership retreat in Bangladesh with all of the country representatives from our Asia programs. Then, a month later, there was another retreat with all the country representatives from the Africa programs. In two months, I was able to meet all of the key leadership across the globe including all of the country heads and the programmatic leads that support them. Then, I spent a good chunk of time with the executive director of BRAC in Bangladesh, the executive director of BRAC International, who oversees the non-Bangladesh program work, my counterpart at BRAC UK, and all of the senior leadership. I asked tons and tons of questions and tried to absorb as much as I could. Although I didn't have a predecessor to learn from, there were plenty of other people to speak with and lots of materials from earlier board meetings, grant proposals, etc., to read. All of that helped enormously.

**What kinds of questions did you feel were important to ask?**

I asked questions about the history, how things had worked before, and people's roles. I think that can be hard to figure out, particularly in NGOs, where sometimes people are important, not because of their titles, but because of their histories or who they are. Some of it was just trying to understand how things operated. I asked a lot about what wasn't working, what challenges they were facing, and the barriers to accomplishing more. People are always eager to share everything they think could be improved. Unpacking that was helpful.

**Were there things that the organization did to help you prepare?**

One of the board members, who is based here in New York, met with me every single week and hashed through everything I had on my mind. This was incredibly helpful. Having someone on the board to partner with early on, whether it's the chair or another board member who is local, can make a big difference. Another thing that made it easier for me to transition was a fairly long gap between the former CEO's departure and my arrival—it was eight or nine months—and there were quite a few new people at BRAC USA. So the team was hungry for leadership and were very welcoming.

## Do you have any advice for leaders about which skills they should acquire to be successful in a role like yours?

In higher education and in nonprofits, I think the finance function tends to be pigeonholed. What I had been exposed to when I worked at Price Waterhouse, however, was CFOs talking with the big customers or clients, going on roadshows, and talking to investors. There's a big external component. In the private sector, it's more likely that the CFO is on a path to move into a CEO role. I pursued my vision of a CFO, not the more narrow, conventional view of financial managers in higher education. I think that put me on more of a leadership track.

Also, in any nonprofit, whether it's higher education or global development, fundraising is an enormous part of a CEO's role. I think it's important to get experience with anything and everything external to the organization, and with fundraising in particular. Most people are somewhat afraid of fundraising; they find it to be uncomfortable. But once you get familiar with it and how to go about it, it can be extremely rewarding. Making a match between a philanthropist and a program you care deeply about—that you know will improve people's lives—is an incredible feeling.

As for making that final leap into a CEO role, to be honest, no matter how ready or capable you are, the right opportunity must present itself. I had thought about moving toward a CEO role at other points in time. But coming from a functional background, rather than a programmatic background, it can be tough to find the right opportunity, especially for roles with a global scope, which was very important to me. You have to think about where those opportunities will be and round out your skills in advance. Luck is where opportunity and preparedness meet.

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