

The Case for a Generalist: A Nonprofit's MVP

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Those who know me might (rightly) be concerned about a title hinting at a sports metaphor. But emboldened after attending a recent leadership and strategy conference, I am more convinced than ever that strategy is a team sport for nonprofits, and those nonprofits that recruit Generalists, individuals who can play a variety of roles, to their organizations often are better positioned for success when trying to fulfill their strategic plans.

Generalists Can Go Wide

Nonprofit teams need a seasoned player that can go wide and play different positions as an organization evolves. This is even more important in the rapidly changing world of nonprofits. Constituent needs, funding fluctuations, new opportunities, and unforeseen challenges require today's organizations to be nimble, creative, and flexible. Within this environment, organizations often struggle with not having enough time, talent, or resources to accomplish what is vital to their visions and missions.

Having a Generalist on your team can bring a diversity of talents and skills without adding multiple FTEs. In fact, a Generalist with experience in several different sectors (various for-profit businesses, nonprofits, and/or combination of both) and variety of responsibilities (an array of functional skills, management of staff and projects, and both strategic and tactical accomplishments) naturally can tend to bring a more integrated approach to problem solving because they draw upon a broader range of past experiences.

There is no doubt that a senior level executive with deep and specialized skills plays an essential role on any professional management team. A chief financial officer needs accounting and finance expertise. A chief development officer should have expertise in generating contributed revenues. An IT executive needs to be able to adeptly navigate technological systems and tools. Depending on the organization, other executives may be required to have program and/or functional expertise that are critical to operational success. But a Generalist often can become a nonprofit team's most valuable player (MVP) when faced with talent gaps and short-term challenges.

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Making Room on Your Roster for a Generalist

Forward-thinking nonprofits of all sizes need to integrate risk tolerance into their talent strategies and evaluate the opportunity cost of not recruiting Generalists. Chief executive officers (CEOs) should review their leadership rosters, carefully analyzing the bench strength of the senior teams. Is there a leadership, management, and/or skill-based void in the organization? Is it a short-term or a crippling gap? Having a Generalist on board allows nonprofits the flexibility to leverage scarce human resources while also filling immediate needs. Critically, a Generalist can buy organizations both time and talent during these transitional periods.

Having a Generalist on the senior team also can be a strategic advantage. In fact, one often cited statistic shows that 70 percent of strategic plans are not successful often because they lack the right talent at the right time to implement.¹ A Generalist can be a team's MVP in this case, combing the roles of "thinker" and "doer," and adding leadership that complements the CEO in driving change for the traditionally lean nonprofit. A Generalist's approach introduces an important, unbiased voice in facilitating strategic success; his/her unique interdisciplinary perspective can help effectively frame trade-off discussions and challenge silo thinking. Drawing on past experiences and a diversity of skills, the Generalist becomes an essential and credible resource for helping turn inspirational vision into operational reality.

Lastly, a Generalist can help organizations score even when the game plan is changing. Generalists are frequently comfortable in playing the role of change agent. By virtue of their own diverse professional paths and choices, they embrace transition. Rarely complacent, they see change as a learning opportunity. While not always bringing the deep experience of an expert, they usually are quick students with a thirst for knowledge. Their ability to quickly assimilate and adapt also reflects a healthy tolerance for risk. Thriving in environments that foster change and innovation, the Generalist embodies the ultimate transition team player.

Generalists as Game Changers

Generalists offer a high "return on talent." They provide managerial flexibility, add strategic value, and enhance organizational capacity. They become effective leaders within lean organizations constantly challenged by limited talent resources. In larger organizations, they act as broad-minded facilitators for translating big picture strategies into interdepartmental action plans. But most importantly, Generalists can play a variety of organizational roles because they represent a diversity of skills, experiences, and perspectives.

¹ Ram Charan and Geoffrey Colvin. "Why CEOs Fail," *Fortune Magazine*, June 21, 1999.

Every championship team recognizes the unique contributions of an MVP. For nonprofits, that can mean mission accomplished when a Generalist is part of their leadership roster.

Confessions of a Professional Generalist

Enrolling in a liberal arts college and graduating with an interdisciplinary major (a rarity at the time), should have been the first sign. Working in *three* high-growth jobs in *three* different sectors in the post-college decade, and then enrolling in a general MBA program reinforced what would become a lifelong theme. Yet, it still took over *three* decades of diversified work experience to reconcile myself (and my resume) to the fact that I was a professional Generalist.

My current job at Boston's nonprofit [Citi Performing Arts Center](#) (previously known as the Wang Center for the Performing Arts) is an example of how one Generalist was able to contribute to a winning team. In 2005, the Center launched a comprehensive strategic planning process that proved to be a critical turning point for the organization. I joined a group of dedicated board members and staff as an internal consultant and facilitator, engaging in a fearless reappraisal of the organization's business model, programming, and strategic direction. The result was an ambitious strategic plan for strengthening programming, community outreach, and fiscal sustainability.

Subsequently, I was recruited for the ultimate Generalist job opportunity and became the chief strategic officer. The board and CEO were attracted by my varied work experience, diversified set of skills, and track record within change-oriented organizations. Because the new strategy dramatically influenced every area of the organization, my broad-based background was valued as a flexible resource and organizational asset.

As time progressed and priorities shifted, my responsibilities also changed. In the early years I translated the strategic plan into a [Balanced Scorecard framework](#), facilitated a governance reform initiative, explored nonprofit merger strategies, and played a fundraising role. That led to managing a city-wide collaboration, a new performance evaluation system, and a web redesign project while also helping develop strategic partnerships. Six years later, I have added oversight of the marketing and education departments while continuing to champion several high-level initiatives.

Today, Citi Performing Arts Center is recognized as a best practice nonprofit in many aspects. But during its transformative journey, the organization has had different needs, priorities, and resources. My role has

needed to change as a reflection of this constant evolution. With a fluid job description and an opportunity to make a difference, I can't imagine a better place for a professional Generalist to be.

What Position Should You Play on Your Team?

Answers to the following questions that lead to broader and more varied responsibilities and work experiences could suggest that you should be leveraging the Generalist in you to best apply your talents on your nonprofit's team.

Skills Self-Assessment: What skills comprise your personal portfolio; which do you rate as better than average or highly proficient? Are you an expert in any of them, or do you know enough to be dangerous? Are these skills that come naturally or do you need professional development to become effective? Are you more comfortable as a "jack-of-all trades" or as an "expert?"

Role Play: Is a clearly defined and very specific job description essential to your success and satisfaction? Or do you frequently seek new or additional roles just because you are attracted to the challenge? If so, was the change exhilarating or frustrating?

Learning and Growth: Do you enjoy learning new things? Do you seek situations that require stretching outside your comfort zone? Do you perform better in predictable situations and maintenance-focused roles, or do you thrive in fluid frameworks as a change agent?

Creativity Criteria: Can you imagine alternative futures? Do you approach problem-solving drawing upon multiple perspectives and experiences? Are you more successful when boundaries are not clearly defined?

Adaptability Audit: Is "change" part of your personal DNA? Do you thrive in organizations with change-oriented cultures? Are you comfortable acting in different roles? Do you naturally incorporate contingency planning when problem solving?

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