

How to Engage Senior Leaders in Leadership Development

The Bridgespan Group has prepared a guide to leadership development at nonprofits, [Nonprofit Leadership Development: What's Your "Plan A" for Growing Future Leaders?](#) Alongside the full guide, we're offering a sample of what you'll find in the guide in a series of six articles adapted from its contents. In this article, the first in the series, we discuss how the journey to leadership development starts in the chief executive's office.

Ask just about any expert on leadership, and you'll get the same answer: The leader of any group – large or small, a nonprofit or a for-profit company – sets the organization's tone and directs its focus. That's why it is essential that a nonprofit's leadership development initiatives begin at the very top, with the chief executive officer (CEO) or executive director (for simplicity's sake, we'll refer throughout this article to the generic senior leader as the CEO). No one else can more effectively champion the cause, and development efforts will make little headway if the CEO is unsupportive. Above all, the CEO needs to visibly lead the creation of the organization's Plan A, its road map to developing the leaders who can advance the organization's mission.

First introduced to us by American Express CEO Ken Chenault, Plan A spells out an organization's evolving leadership needs, identifies future leaders, and details activities to strengthen their leadership muscle. In this article, we explore five steps that CEOs can take to jumpstart and sustain Plan A thinking within their organizations:

- **Step 1:** Make it clear that leadership development is a priority.
- **Step 2:** Set expectations and hold senior leaders accountable for leadership development.
- **Step 3:** Build and develop the executive team.
- **Step 4:** Make the most of available HR resources.
- **Step 5:** Engage the board regularly.

Related Tools

- [Are Your Senior Leaders Engaged? An Excerpt from Our Leadership Diagnostic Survey](#)
- [Developing Others at the Y: Competency Description](#)
- [Questions the Board Should Ask the CEO about Leadership Development](#)
- [Questions the CEO Should Ask Each Senior Team Member to Spur Plan A Thinking](#)
- [A CEO's Leadership Development Calendar](#)

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Step 1: Make it clear that leadership development is a priority

CEOs like to say that “our people are our most important asset.” But it’s far less common to hear a CEO draw a clear connection between effective *leaders* and the organization’s ability to make an impact. How do leaders make this case? One approach is to cite evidence that leadership development leads to stronger results. An example of such evidence is an article in the [July 2010 issue of McKinsey Quarterly](#)¹ that describes the effects of leadership development at Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA). Through the study, the organization learned that the training program generated financial returns that were more than four times its cost. Most important, leaders who underwent the training outperformed their peers in fundraising, enrolling youth in programs, and retaining young people.

Examples like this drive home the message that leadership development is critical to the organization’s mission. From there it’s just a short step to asking leaders to commit themselves to leadership development – and demanding that they show results. (See an [excerpt from our leadership diagnostic survey](#) to assess your senior leaders’ engagement in leadership development.)

Step 2: Set expectations for line managers and hold them accountable

The CEO states the vision and makes the case for leadership development, but line managers are responsible for executing the development strategy. Line managers gauge the development needs of potential leaders, provide them with growth opportunities, and coach them through challenges. They also are responsible for drawing up a Plan A for their departments, in which they lay out their plans for developing their teams to meet future leadership challenges.

To set the expectation that line managers will take on these responsibilities, job descriptions can state explicitly that managers’ responsibilities include developing direct reports and promotions can be linked to development goals. CEOs also can require senior team managers to include leadership development among the goals that form the basis of their annual performance evaluations. (See [Developing Others at the Y](#) for an example of how YMCA of the USA describes leadership development within its organization.)

Step 3: Build and develop the senior team

The CEO’s work with the organization’s senior team is a powerful way to signal the value of leadership development throughout the organization. By asking senior leaders to include a personal-development goal in their five or six annual goals, and by making clear that they should ask the same of their direct reports, the CEO can generate organizational momentum for leadership development.

Related Content

- [Nonprofit Leadership Development: What’s Your “Plan A” for Growing Future Leaders?](#)
The full guide describes how nonprofit leaders can create and implement a leadership-development process within their organizations.
- [Chapter 1: Engaging Your Senior Leaders](#)
The first chapter of Plan A explores the topic of engaging leaders in depth and includes examples of nonprofits that have done it successfully.

Above all, the CEO can help leadership development go viral in the organization by working with senior team members to create a Plan A for their areas of responsibility. These plans include a vision for how the team may need to evolve to tackle new priorities and address critical competency gaps. ([See Questions a CEO Can Ask Their Senior Team in Order to Spur Plan A Thinking.](#))

Step 4: Make the most of your HR resources

Nonprofits with a formal human resources (HR) staff can help themselves by clarifying the important supporting role that HR can play in leadership-development efforts. Organizations with limited HR capabilities might ask an HR staff member simply to collect data for decision making and ensure that senior leaders are following up on their responsibilities, while organizations with more robust capabilities can use HR to coordinate development-related processes so that they are integrated into existing workflows wherever possible. Organizations with especially strong HR functions can use HR staffers to coach, counsel, and advise line managers with little or no experience in talent development.

Step 5: Engage the board regularly

The board and the CEO share responsibility for ensuring that the organization has the leadership necessary to meet its mission consistently over time. But anecdotal evidence suggests that many boards consider the topic of leadership and succession planning only when it's time to select the next CEO. More effective boards support leadership development by:

- Delivering regular, formal performance reviews of the CEO: These reinforce the importance of leadership development and model constructive feedback for the rest of the organization.
- Checking in periodically to review the status of leadership-development efforts. A logical time is during annual planning, when the board can review the organization's Plan A, along with other plans.
- Informally mentoring and coaching up-and-coming leaders.

The five action steps above, once integrated into the [annual activities of the CEO](#), senior team, and board, lay the groundwork for effective, systematic leadership development and help to create a broader culture of leadership development within the organization.

Questions the CEO Should Ask Each Senior Team Member about Leadership Development

- What do you think the leadership team of your department/division is going to look like in three years?
- Do you think we have the internal talent you will need to execute over the next three years? For which positions are we likely to need to look externally?
- Do you talk to your direct reports about their aspirations and development needs and incorporate these in their development plans? Are they doing the same with the staff they manage?
- What actions are you taking to develop your direct reports? Where do you need help?
- Is there anything that's working particularly well – and that we should share with the rest of the senior team?
- What are you doing to develop yourself?
- What can I do to help you with your development or development of your staff?

Questions the Board Should Ask the CEO about Leadership Development

- What is your senior leadership team going to look like in three years?
- Do you have the internal talent you need to execute our strategic priorities over the next three years? For which positions are we likely to need to look externally?
- What are you doing to develop internal talent?
- Who are the rising stars that we should meet?
- What are you doing to develop yourself?
- What can we do to help you with your development or development of your staff?

Are Your Senior Leaders Engaged? An Excerpt from Our Leadership Diagnostic Survey

You know your senior leaders are truly engaged in leadership development if:

- The CEO/Executive Director is actively engaged in building a strong pipeline of future leaders.
- Current leaders are actively engaged in building a strong pipeline of future leaders.
- Board members are appropriately engaged in building a strong pipeline of future leaders.
- Current leaders are equipped to develop future leaders.
- Current leaders are held accountable for building a strong pipeline of future leaders.
- Current leaders are recognized for their efforts to develop future leaders.
- Organizational culture supports and values leadership development.
- Sufficient resources (e.g., funding, time) are invested in leadership development.

A CEO's Leadership-Development Calendar

Save the Children's CEO Carolyn Miles makes sure that timely leadership-development discussions occur with her senior reports and board by scheduling them:

December: CEO meets with each member of the senior team to set five or six individual goals for the coming year. At least one of those goals must be related to leadership development. Team members know they will be evaluated on their progress against those goals.

January: CEO holds talent-review meetings with each member of the senior team. Team members assess the succession potential of each of their direct reports, identifying people who are ready to step immediately into a greater leadership role and those who will be ready after future development. Data gathered during these meetings feeds into the CEO's annual report to the board on talent and leadership development, delivered at the end of the first quarter.

February: Review of succession plan for senior team with the Board and vice president of human resources in a closed-door session

March-May: CEO holds progress meetings with individual team members, checking on their progression against goals. Senior team members are expected to conduct similar meetings with their direct reports.

June: CEO meets with the entire senior leadership team to review and update organization's succession plan.

Questions the CEO Should Ask Each Senior Team Member to Spur Plan A Thinking

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