

# The Future Leadership Challenge

R. Andrew Swinney 09 June 2011

When we manage the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in these crisis-centered times, the focus often is “of the moment.” Keeping up with what is directly in front of us can be all-consuming. However, as difficult as it is to step off the typical daily treadmill, if our sector is ever to advance beyond the crisis *du jour*, its future also needs our immediate attention.

Where is the next leadership cohort coming from? What are we doing to advance the next generation of those who will teach our future workers, heal our illnesses, entertain and uplift us, support our natural areas, and care for the people who fall through the holes in our frequently overburdened social services safety-net?

As the baby boom generation currently in leadership positions across these sectors begins to retire, the need to identify and equip future leaders becomes critical. Pathfinder Solutions, Inc., a Colorado-based organizations, which specializes in providing research to foundations, has estimated that as many as 70 to 80 percent of nonprofit senior leadership may exit the sector in the next decade, resulting in the national need for 640,000 new leaders.

Although the 2008 economic recession slowed the executive exodus when individuals deferred their retirements, the large number of those approaching retirement age combined with the significant role nonprofits play as employers in Southeastern Pennsylvania strongly indicates the need for a proactive approach to preparing for the inevitable vacancies.

Are we, as a sector, ready? Are we doing all that we can do to not only identify but also to equip future leaders with the tools so essential to success in the fast-changing world in which we operate?

I think not.

The nonprofit/philanthropic sector is diverse both as to mission/purpose and to size. It ranges from the very small grassroots, neighborhood organizations all the way up to major universities and hospitals. While it might seem that such diversity would create many options and opportunities for those who wish to develop leadership skills, that diversity instead is cited by some observers as the reason why there is no established career path for the next generation of leaders to follow.

The nonprofit sector encompasses too much, that line of thinking goes, to provide a universal track of progression for key management positions. Many of those who come to the sector initially stumble upon their roles, it is argued, and they are driven more by passion for a particular cause

than by a commitment to or an understanding of the field as a sector unto itself.

Recently the Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy (EPIP) held its annual conference here in Philadelphia. This is an organization that intentionally attracts young professionals in the philanthropic sector who want to learn what others like them have experienced and find guidance and mentoring for their own career journeys.

Something EPIP does quite effectively is provide hands-on opportunities for these young professionals to hone their own management skills by developing their own agendas, structuring presentations and applying the lessons learned from the feedback they receive.

Do we provide such opportunities within our own organizations? Do we intentionally look at new hires as future leaders? Do we identify opportunities through which these hires can grow and develop a broad set of skills that will allow them to advance?

When I entered the nonprofit sector several years ago, I assumed the career path would include going to a larger institution, but there was no identifiable way to get there. It appeared as if each organization was a silo unto itself and that advancement depended upon someone above you retiring or on your ability to uncover upcoming openings outside of your organization through networking.

Even today, I still hear about someone who is seeking to advance by moving to another organization, only to be told that their particular experience does not qualify them for the role. Our sector seems to typecast individuals early on as a "youth organizations manager" or an "arts leader" rather than seeing that each shares a skill set.

While certainly each nonprofit field has its particular area of expertise, such functions as fund-raising, personnel management, and nonprofit business acumen, to name a few, apply across the board and are, in fact, a highly portable toolkit. Rather than being insular in our thinking and limiting candidates for executive management to the usual suspects in any specific field, the sector might be better served by embracing those out-of-the-box approaches a non-traditional management candidate might bring.

We must become more focused on providing a clearer path for advancement for our nonprofit leaders that transcends these self-imposed barriers. We must come to agreement on the necessary skills and provide a progression of opportunities for young professionals through which they can learn and apply the common proficiencies.

The alternative is a lack of intentionality that will hurt our field by discouraging the next generation.

We are fortunate that young people continue to want to

join the nonprofit and philanthropic world with the passion and drive to make a difference. We must provide them with the tools to ensure that their drive and passion can be effectively channeled to advance the important work that is being done by the many varied organizations that define our regional quality of life.

We're all in a long-distance race. The challenges our nonprofits address and the solutions they apply are not those of the quick fix. We need to ensure that when the current team is ready to pass the baton, the next set of runners is fit and in condition to take up their leg of the race.

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