

Professional Development of Nonprofit Managers

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Much attention has and is being paid to the “leadership crisis” in the nonprofit sector. In large part, the response to this crisis has focused on the expected large exodus of executive directors from the sector. The author’s experience working with executive directors drew attention to the fact that executives are significantly impacted when the management staff they must rely on to be able to do their own work are either not available or do not have the management and leadership skills and competencies at the level needed. This study was conducted to learn more about those management development needs.

Over the summer of 2007, executive directors and nonprofit managers of nonprofit organizations in the Bay Area of California were separately surveyed about the professional development needs of nonprofit managers. The survey focused on management development as distinct from development within specific fields of service (e.g., clinician training). Seventy-six (76) executive directors and 112 nonprofit managers responded. A goal of the survey was to learn what nonprofit managers want and/or need in order to grow and advance in the nonprofit field consistent with their interests and career goals. (Details of methodology and survey content are available upon request.)

Respondents from both surveys came from a broad sample of nonprofit organizations. Agency size ranged from less than five staff to over 200, with budget sizes ranging from less than \$500,000 to over \$10 million. There was no one category within these ranges that had a notably larger number of participants. The fields of service ranged from social services to education with over 40% of both executives and managers coming from social or multi-service organizations. The total number of managers employed in all of the participating organizations was 774. Thus, the response rate of 112 was 14% of possible respondents, assuming the survey was available to all managers in these organizations.

Findings

About the nonprofit managers

- The years of service in the nonprofit sector for the 112 responding managers ranged from less than one year to over twelve years.
- 65% have worked in the sector more than five years.
- 52% have been in management positions in the sector for more than five years.
- 49% have a Master’s level degree or higher level of education.
- 44% supervise programs.
- 29% supervise supervisors.
- 31% are interested in becoming an executive director. Managers expressed interest in advancing within the agencies they are working for or advancement in

another agency along the same path as their current work, compared to becoming an executive director.

Need and interest in professional development

- Executive and managers alike strongly agree that managers would benefit from management and leadership development opportunities.
- Managers indicate their need is for advanced level development opportunities.
- Executives indicate their managers need basic or intermediate level opportunities.
- Over 60% of the managers indicated an interest in or need for development in 38 of the 45 categories queried.
- Categories with the highest rated interest and/or need were:
 - **Strategic planning**
 - **Program development**
 - **Performance evaluation**
 - **Leading versus managing**
 - **Conflict management**
 - **Managing change**
- Many managers expressed a strong interest in experiential and/or on-the-job training opportunities. They want opportunities to share learning experiences with their colleagues both within the organization and with other managers from other organizations.

Barriers to nonprofit managers' professional development

- The biggest barrier identified by both executives and managers is time: for managers, time away from work (which they do not have or cannot get) or time away from their families. This is also reflected in some executives' comments that managers are unwilling to attend available opportunities.
- A secondary barrier is lack of funding to cover professional development costs.
- Findings are the same for large and small organizations.
- A third barrier for managers is lack of support from the organization.

Examples of managers' comments

“There is not a lot of room to ‘climb the ladder’ unless I want to be an executive director.”

“There is a lack of leadership in the sector to support this and lack of realistic job design.”

“Not having enough time for professional development is the main barrier. Nonprofits are generally very lean and the majority of hours worked is pretty focused on programs and supporting activities.”

“We have attended multiple trainings – but few address how to manage effectively.”

“We work reactively all the time and there is no great body planning for and encouraging the future of nonprofit leadership. This includes educating the Board of Directors on what is reasonable to expect from an ED and what they need to be successful.”

Discussion

The needs and desires of nonprofit managers for management and leadership development are strong and broad. More than creating a list of topics for potential classes or seminars, this study highlights systemic issues that are barriers to addressing and meeting these needs. If managers cannot or will not free up the time they need to access development opportunities, advocating for particular opportunities and/or the resources to fund them will have little impact. Nonprofit managers are looking for support for their development within their organizations—opportunities for mentoring, on-the-job experiences—and externally by learning with and from their peers. This begs the question: how can nonprofit organizations develop a culture of professional development for managers? How can nonprofit organizations restructure to allow for “time away” for learning opportunities? What kinds of advocacy, funding, and change is required?

The education and experience of nonprofit managers needs to be better understood and recognized. It is of concern that executive directors perceive their managers as needing basic management training, while managers—most with masters’ degrees and several years of experience—are asking for more advanced opportunities. How should nonprofit management and leadership competencies be defined and measured?

The finding that only 35 of the 112 managers participating in the study are interested in becoming an executive director is consistent with other recent studies. Thirty managers said they were “unsure” about that career direction. With better understanding and attention to these managers’ needs, perhaps they will ultimately choose to stay in the sector in a leadership role. Indeed, this study indicates that managers want to stay in the sector and advance—most just don’t want the job of the executive director.

A recent Annie E. Casey Foundation study highlights the need to address structural issues in nonprofit organizations that hinder the development and advancement of nonprofit leaders.² The comments of both executives and managers from this study confirm this. Addressing the structural issues of the demands of the work and the lack of a professional development value within the culture of the nonprofit sector is a necessary first step toward having an impact on the real and significant needs for professional management development in nonprofits.

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1. In collaboration with the Silicon Valley of Nonprofits
2. Kunreuther, Frances and Patrick A. Corvington, *Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007).