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# Getting Ahead in the Mission-Driven Sector: Creating Your Nonprofit Career Trajectory.

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*In the nonprofit sector, we most often ask ourselves, “What change do we wish to seek in the world?” We are encouraged, even trained, to be selfless and spend our time concerned about causes bigger than just ourselves. And yet, as executive recruiters, we would posit that doing this is exactly what keeps many nonprofit employees from making their deepest social impact. We encourage our candidates to consider their role in driving their own careers, determining both where they ultimately wish to be, and what they need to do to get there.*

*Rising nonprofit stars become stuck in their careers for many reasons, from waiting to be noticed and promoted by internal managers to simply not knowing how to gather the requisite skills to make themselves attractive to headhunters looking to recruit the next great leader. Regardless of the reason, now is the time to take charge of your own career, build your own career trajectory, and make your own success.*

*A career track in the nonprofit sector requires self-motivation and planning along with the fortitude to make things happen. The following approaches will help your nonprofit career flourish:*

## **Get a Full Toolbox**

As you scope out what assignments you might take in your current job, or what job you will seek next, it will be helpful to examine your tool box and determine what skills you have, and what skills you’ll need. CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the Meyer Foundation published “Daring to Lead 2006” in which they surveyed nearly 2,000 nonprofit executives in eight cities about the future of executive leadership in nonprofit organizations to determine which skills were necessary for nonprofit leaders. Here is what they found.

**Leadership and Influence:** Most nonprofits do not have the luxury of incentivizing with monetary rewards. Instead, those in the nonprofit sector are challenged to influence their employees in other ways, by constantly connecting daily outcomes to overarching goals, underscoring the importance of personal contributions to the team effort, and encouraging employees to continue to work

toward a solution to sometimes overwhelming problems. Solving world hunger doesn’t happen in a day, a week, a month, or even a year, but achieving specific goals along the way allows nonprofits to benchmark their successes to being part of the ultimate solution.

**Managing Up, Down, and Sideways:** The nonprofit sector is a diverse group of team contributions, not individual trailblazers. It is true that nonprofits are founded by dynamic, focused, charismatic superstars, but they are run on a daily basis by those who can ultimately manage well in all directions: up to the senior staff or board; down to the staff; and sideways to constituents, funders, and other stakeholders.

**Delegating with Kindness and Empathy While Demanding Accountability:** No one is in the nonprofit sector for the high salaries or fancy rewards. Employees aren’t motivated by climbing the ladder one more rung or scoring the bonus on closing the deal. They work in the sector because they

believe in the mission of the organization and believe their contributions matter. Managers who delegate with this in mind will likely have the most productive staff.

## **Adaptability, Flexibility, and Openness in Management and Communications:**

There is no cookie-cutter type of person working in a nonprofit. Similarly, each of the various internal or external stakeholders you might encounter on a daily basis is different from the next. Those with a desire and demonstrated ability to work respectfully and comfortably with families, community partners, elected officials, donors, media, individual citizens, and other culturally and socioeconomically diverse groups will transition most easily to the nonprofit sector.

**Ability to Manage a Broad Portfolio of Responsibilities:** Because nonprofits are small—again, many have a budget of less than \$1 million—they often pool jobs together. Not all nonprofits can afford a director of development and a director of communications and, instead, hire a director of external relations. Similarly, vice presidents of finance and operations abound. The type of work being done remains the same, but more is asked of each staff member.

**Knowing How to Get to Yes:** Knowing when and how to ask for resources (from donor prospects, board members, and staff alike), embodying an organization’s mission, and understanding human nature is key to any nonprofit executive’s success. Simply put, it takes a village to raise a nonprofit.

**Managing Dotted-Line Relationships:** Nonprofits rely on the kindness of others to accomplish their missions. Whether it be a large monetary donation or hosted office space, free services like printing, or loaned executives, nonprofits must “make nice” with partners and stakeholders to whom they are indebted. In addition, many nonprofits collaborate with other organizations to accomplish their mission, like a neighborhood-wide cleanup or a statewide reading drive. These stakeholder

relationships are dotted, not straight lines. Keeping these partners happy and deeply invested is a challenge, and skill at doing this is attractive to the nonprofit sector.

**Delivering Impressive Returns:** Nonprofit employees are asked to do more with less. A proven track record of delivering results where the resources are limited and time is short facilitates the sector switch. Public dollars come with public scrutiny, and private dollars come with private scrutiny, but scrutiny is scrutiny. The ability to withstand it, and perform well against it, is key.

**A Long-Term View:** Nonprofits do not judge themselves by quarterly earnings reports. Often, the pace of change is slower. Being able to see the big picture and manage any setbacks along the way with renewed energy and idea, is an important skill for a nonprofit sector employee.

**A Distinct Passion for the Work of the Nonprofit:** Working in a nonprofit setting can be difficult. Some days it can feel almost impossible. However, a genuine and deep passion for the work, as well as an intense respect and love of the people being served, can sustain even the most disheartened.

How do you develop this toolbox in a sector where there isn't always a clear career path? First, think about what else you can do in your current job, and think about what else you can do in your current organization. Then put your nose to the grindstone and do it excellently.

Get noticed, and blow your colleagues out of the water. As a result, you'll get more and more assignments, and that will bring your more and more career advancement. More importantly, don't overlook the fact that you'll likely need to step outside of your current job to build out your entire toolbox.

Here are some ways to gain experience and stretch your knowledge:

### ***Get on a Board***

Let talk about the obvious benefits you would reap if you were to join a board.

First, the board oversees an organization whose mission is close to your heart. Second, the board will allow you to play a role you enjoy. Third, the board has expectations and needs around giving, getting, and governing that you can meet. Most important for you, the board will provide for your scaffolding as you build your nonprofit career.

Your time, energy, intelligence, and financial resources—or connections to such—are worth something. In return for them, think strategically about what the board can do for you. You should be clear with yourself and others about what you are expecting. Use the board to build your knowledge of a particular mission area, build a specific skill set, but also use it as a platform to show influential people in the nonprofit world your expertise and competence.

Make sure you also think strategically about whom you want to meet through board service. Nonprofits operate on word of mouth, personal connections, and social marketing. Most people who sit on nonprofit boards are also sitting on others or have sat on others in the past. If each nonprofit board averages around 8 members, your 7 board cohorts can connect you immediately to 56 other nonprofit decision makers.

### ***Get Mentored***

It's not typical in the nonprofit sector for there to be any purposeful focus placed on internal management development, successor grooming, or skills training. While your counterparts in law firms or business fields are on a partner track or in management training programs, nonprofit employees often fend for themselves. There are two reasons for this.

First, many founding executive directors are in those roles because they were exceptionally good at the frontline, direct service work of the nonprofit sector. Someone noticed and gave them some money to expand and do more, and the next thing they knew, they were sitting on top of a ten-site, multimillion-dollar change agent that was a management catastrophe on the inside. These founders have the best of intentions but still a singular vision for the communities they serve. At the same time, they have gotten to where they are because of this vision. They are unlikely to have stopped along the way for management training or reflective thinking about building staff or grooming successors. Because of this, while they may deeply desire a well-oiled management team that employs sound business practices and effective staff development, they simply may not know how to make it a reality.

## ***10 “Upwardly Mobile” Moves***

*Here are some things you can do TODAY to get your career on the right track:*

- 1. Focus on your current job and do your best.***
- 2. Establish a network and nurture it.***
- 3. Take advantage of continuing education.***
- 4. Find a mentor, or two or three.***
- 5. Ask for additional responsibilities, pick up projects, and stay late.***
- 6. If you are unable to get a raise, ask for a fancy, new title.***
- 7. Take a new job.***
- 8. Establish yourself as an expert.***
- 9. Get on a board and get comfortable in a leadership role.***
- 10. Do not be afraid to change the plan.***

Second, resources of nonprofits are constrained. If faced with the choice of spending money on the guaranteed, quick return of more services to the field or on the uncertainty of training for a staff member who may or may not blossom and may or may not remain with the organization for the long-term, most managers would choose the former rather than the latter. Most nonprofits aren't large enough to offer a specific career path with an obvious "next step" internally, so with many staff members looking outside for their next opportunity, allocating resources to training becomes less attractive.

Nonprofit employees must take an active role in their professional development, seeking out mentors and training opportunities on their own and building a case to their management about why funds should be expended for training. The odds are that a good case will go far.

### ***Get Noticed***

In a day when technology provides anyone with a bully pulpit, you can become the master of your own career destiny, becoming an expert by announcing yourself as one and then backing it up with substance. Building your own professional brand – using social media is the easiest way – quickly enables you to have a network and a web of influence and knowledge beyond where your financial resources or 9-5 persona might presently allow. Think about those people to whom you refer when you want to get the latest news about the most important trends in the sector; then determine where your knowledge or connections might provide easy access to a sphere of influence and embody it. If perception is reality, build it and they will come.

### ***Get Headhunted***

A search firm is only as good as the searches it has in-house at any given moment. As such, it does not pay to spend a great deal of time trying to get a headhunter to call you back. That said, many retained nonprofit executive search firms, just like their counterparts in the for-profit sector, specialize in particular fields—from higher

education, to health care, to advocacy—or functional areas of expertise, such as development, finance, or operations. If a firm doesn't have a search that is right for you presently, they may get something appropriate next month.

A great way to crack executive search firms is to find a way to help them in a search where you are not a potential candidate. For example, if a search firm is representing a nonprofit with a job in finance, but you work in operations, call the headhunter and tell him or her about the people you know who might be appropriate or interested, or about the issue-related networking group you have joined where you could distribute the job announcement. Of course, once you have helped the headhunter, take a minute or two to mention your own job search. Note that you will send, along with the contact information of the individuals or groups you are recommending, your own résumé for their file. Because you have just helped them, they may be more open to hearing about your own search. Then, when you need to call a firm about the job you actually want, you can say that you "are Joe Smith, and as you'll recall, we talked about a search you did last month for..." Headhunters see hundreds of résumés each week. They are unlikely to search for your résumé when they get retained to fill your dream job, but they will remember that you talked and that you were helpful. With additional reminding, you will be able to have your first directed conversation about your own skills and qualifications.

Unlike the for-profit sector, there are no nonprofit executive search firms that represent job seekers as their agents. Some, though, (such as [Nonprofit Professionals Advisory Group](#)) are staffed with experienced headhunters who provide fee-based services to job seekers, like résumé consultation, interview training, or job search strategy development. Using these services is a good way to make sure that your background is resonating with a recruiter in the nonprofit sector and that you are going about your search in the best possible way.

The nonprofit sector is diverse and welcoming with endless opportunities. As more people pursue their passions to make a

difference, the sector will experience growth and expansion. If you are willing to roll up your sleeves, remain open to new ideas and challenges and are poised to take advantage of new opportunities, an exciting career path awaits.



***If you are struggling with what's next in your nonprofit career or have specific questions about where you're headed, we can help. The Nonprofit Professionals Advisory Group provides customized and personable services, which may help you chart a career course, explore new opportunities, or land a position in the nonprofit sector. Whether it's helping craft a top-notch resume or a full fledged strategic job search plan, you can find more about our services [here](#).***