

## Achieving Better Results Through Shared Leadership

Written by Umi Howard  
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These are anxious times for the nonprofit sector. Organizational leaders are being forced to implement layoffs and eliminate programs and services. Staff members of all rank continue to work despite salary reductions and widespread job insecurity. Public funding is locked up at the local, state and federal levels. As I write this, in Philadelphia, where I work, a budget impasse at the state level is forcing nonprofits to take out lines of credit to keep their doors open. And now, even the available credit is drying up. Nonprofit organizations continue to operate without the promise of their funding being restored to previous levels. They take these risks because the people who do this work are driven by both their personal and organizational missions.

Within the past five years, several studies have depicted a pending “leadership crisis” in the nonprofit sector. A combination of the proliferation of nonprofits and the aging of the sector’s current leadership led some to predict the need for as many as 640,000 new managers within the sector over the next ten years (Bell, Moyers, and Wolfred 2006). *Daring to Lead 2006*, a national study published by CompassPoint and the Meyer Foundation, found that three-quarters of the executive directors surveyed planned to leave their jobs within five years (Bell et al. 2006, 5). Nor has sufficient time been dedicated to succession planning or leadership development in many nonprofits. For example,

### *Daring to Lead*

found that only 29% of executives surveyed had even discussed a succession plan with their board of directors (Bell et al. 2006, 7). Although turnover is not happening as quickly as the study suggested it would, it remains evident that much of current leadership will soon be moving on.

James Spillane opens his book *Distributed Leadership* (Spillane 2006) with a description of a classic “hero” leader in the form of a school principal for whom he once worked. This sort of superhuman individual has become the model for what a nonprofit executive should be. However, many younger professionals are eschewing the ideal of the “hero” leader. In studies by organizations like the Center for Creative Leadership (Martin 2007) and the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (Solomon and Sandahl 2007), younger professionals have expressed new expectations about the nature of leadership in nonprofit work and different ideas about how the executive director position should look. Most of those ideas correlate with what many in the industry would argue is needed to make the job more sustainable: pay commensurate with the heavy workload and intense level of responsibility, increased work/life balance and greater distribution of responsibility for the core areas of work. These desires to reshape the executive position and a new approach to the way we work led to a concern among some veterans in the sector that younger professionals either did not want, or were not ready, to take over those leaderships roles soon becoming available.

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In this article, I argue younger professionals' concerns do not reflect lack of interest or ability, and that not just more succession planning but a fundamental shift to a shared leadership model is necessary to address the leadership gap. Moreover, this approach is more likely than traditional hierarchical approaches to succeed in today's environment.

Of course, we must acknowledge that there is nothing new under the sun. Many models of shared leadership were first attempted in American organizations during the 1960s and '70s. In fact, some cooperative leadership models date back much further. But most organizational structures used in the nonprofit world today still employ a hierarchical model where decisions are made at the top and implemented at the bottom. We have not yet created, or adopted en masse, the types of work environments that reflect 21st-century realities. Models for shared or participative leadership are being used in isolation by various organizations around the country, but are not widespread.

In the past it was assumed that nonprofit professionals would do this work despite the lower pay, despite the lack of resources and despite the relative powerlessness of their position because they were committed to their particular cause. We should not assume that this will continue to be the case. People coming up within the sector today want to exercise control over their work and careers, need sufficient compensation to pay off their often considerable debt and are not predisposed to conform to current expectations. A new set of incentives needs to be employed for today's younger professionals, a fact that should not be confused with a lack of dedication on their part. In return for more reasonable workloads and other changes, young professionals are prepared to bring high levels of skill proficiency and innovative problem-solving to their organizations.

Younger professionals place significant emphasis on the desire to work with other smart people through a team-based approach to accomplish their common goals. They also want their input to tangibly impact the decisions being made in their organizations. In his article "What Is Participative Leadership?" Mitch McCrimmon sums up the appeal of participative and shared leadership to this group:

Today, so many workers are intelligent, highly skilled professionals. Motivating employees who are knowledge workers is based on making them feel valued. There is simply no better way to make people feel valued than to ask them, genuinely, for their advice. You can pat people on the back and recognize their efforts but this is not as effective in motivating people as involving them in important decisions (McCrimmon 2007, 1).

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Shared leadership can help address the pending leadership gap by making leadership positions more attractive. Many younger leaders want and need to try different ways of organizing the people and the work in their organizations. This approach will help decrease the burnout in top jobs that makes leaders less effective or forces them out the door while they still have much to contribute. Shared leadership models make “lower-level” jobs more interesting, thereby reducing turnover. Participating in decision-making, contributing to strategy design and bearing responsibility for results are key learning experiences and requirements for all leaders. Allowing a high percentage of nonprofit staff to learn those skills on the job seems like an ideal way to build a new generation of leaders.

To be clear, this is not just an argument for increased egalitarianism or parity in the workplace. More centrally, this is an argument for organizational sustainability and excellence in our field. Nonprofit professionals continuously demonstrate their commitment to their work. They do so particularly in times like these when, because of the economic recession, they are working for salaries reduced from levels already below those of their corporate sector counterparts. Their commitment to the organizations they work for is grounded in the pull of the mission, the impact on clients and the bond with their colleagues. Imagine the potential that can be unlocked if leaders increase their level of satisfaction with the way their organizations run, and the extent to which nonprofit staff are included in shaping their work.

Indeed, the most successful organizations are “learning organizations,” where smart people at all pay grades own the work, contribute actively to decision-making and develop strategy: in essence, they are able to lead. As Spillane explains, the success found at the school where he worked was due not only to one brilliant “hero” leader, but to the interconnected efforts of the school’s staff, who each individually held a great deal of ownership over his or her work (Spillane 2006, 31).

With the current economic downturn causing many organizations to shed needed employees, it is imperative that we find new ways to unlock the potential to achieve of those who remain on staff. Nonprofits are increasingly being asked by funders to partner with other organizations. For these collaborations to be successful, staff at various levels need to exercise strong critical thinking and communication skills. Funders can contribute to this process of organizational evolution by keeping an open mind when faced with non-traditional models of leadership and resisting the urge to determine “Who’s really in charge?” The answer to that question may be

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different than it has been in the past, but with no less, and perhaps more, effective outcomes.

Fostering experimentation with shared leadership models is a sector-wide imperative. The benefits accrue not just for individual organizations, but the sector as a whole. Younger professionals are much more likely to switch jobs, sectors and even careers in their lifetime than those from previous generations. Cultivating the skills that make them contributing team members and leaders in their own right will serve them and the industry no matter where they go.

The request being made here is that nonprofit leaders continue to push the envelope and explore how they cultivate leadership not just in their eventual successors, but in all staff. Moreover, the hope is that leaders take time to consider the way staffing teams are structured and experiment with alternative models. Additionally, current leaders who have worked in organizations with shared leadership models should share their experiences and hard-earned lessons with their colleagues.

The world and our lives are more interconnected than they ever have been in human history. There is very little that we do alone or by sheer force of will. We need input, buy-in and ongoing engagement from others if our ideas and institutions are to last beyond the efforts of individual leaders, and if we are to rise to the challenges our sector and our clients are facing.



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