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FINDING A GUIDE: THE VALUE OF HAVING A PROFESSIONAL MENTOR

In any field, having a professional mentor can help individuals develop and advance their careers. Mentors are especially important in the nonprofit sector, where structured career development opportunities are not always readily available.

A strong mentoring relationship is built on collaboration and the commitment to the professional development of one or both of its participants. While in the typical mentoring relationship, one participant has more experience, skill, knowledge than the other, many strong mentoring relationships provide an opportunity for both parties to learn from each other through the development of a caring and respectful partnership.

The Growth of Mentoring in the Social Sector

Corporate mentoring programs have long been recognized as an essential strategy for attracting, developing, and retaining top employees. According to a survey by the American Society for Training and Development, 75% of private sector executives said that mentoring had been critical in helping them reach their current position.

In the social sector, employee mentoring programs are more unusual. While some innovative organizations are taking steps to create effective internal programs, other organizations offer external programs that connect mentors and mentees; these programs can be a great option for nonprofits that lack the resources to provide internal programs.

For example, the [Center for Nonprofit Development](#) and the [International Mentoring Network Organization](#) have developed their own mentor-matching programs to help connect seasoned nonprofit professionals with professionals earlier in their careers. The Center for Nonprofit Development focuses on connecting new but high-level nonprofit leaders with other, more experienced nonprofit leaders to help them strategically solve organizational challenges or create carefully developed plans for the future of the mentee's organization. The International Mentoring Network Organization applies an "open source" approach to mentoring, giving its members access to interviews with experienced professionals, discussion forums, and a mentor match service.

Why a Mentor?

There are a number of benefits to building a mentor relationship with a seasoned nonprofit professional, most notably access to new contacts, knowledge, and skills.

“Mentors can do a number of things for your career. They can help you build your resume, guide you on a project, and help you identify resources, including referring you to other mentors and important people in your field,” said Ken Williams, Director of the New Voices National Fellowship Program and author of the monograph “[Mentoring the Next Generation](#).”

Mentors provide developing nonprofit leaders with the support they might not have access to otherwise. For example, access to the mentor’s personal network can give emerging leaders a chance to meet important people at a crucial time in their careers and can broaden their range of possible professional opportunities.

The New Voices National Fellowship Program, administered by the Academy for Educational Development, works on leadership development for human rights activists, currently focusing on emerging leaders in the Gulf Coast region. New Voices requires each fellow participating to have a mentor because of the benefits the organization has seen from these relationships.

“In our program we’ve seen mentors help develop the Fellows’ strategic thinking, connections and contacts, and resources and opportunities. Having a mentor provides people with an open space in which to raise issues, tackle challenges, and nurture growth,” Williams said.

Finding a Mentor

A mentor is someone whose knowledge and experience the mentee respects and someone whose wisdom and know-how can support the professional growth and development of the mentee. Often this is a boss, professor or other nonprofit leader who the mentee has already met, but sometimes a mentor can be someone who is not known to the mentee. Mentors do not necessarily need to be the most senior person at an organization or within the field; the right mentor depends on what knowledge the mentee hopes to gain.

“If you don’t have an idea about who to ask to be your mentor, find organizations that work in the area you’re interested in and look to their leaders. Asking to do something as simple as getting a coffee together can be very successful,” Williams said.

Another great way to engage a mentor is to collaborate on a project that is of interest to both parties. “Choose something that supports your potential mentor’s work and ask for some help putting it together,” Williams suggested. “This way, you are both invested in completing a goal together that can lead to a deeper relationship during the process.”

Sustaining Healthy Mentor Relationships

To make the most of a mentoring relationship, start with a formal agreement that outlines the roles and expectations of both participants. Including details such as when the pair will meet, how frequently and for how long, and what the goals of the relationship are will build a strong foundation for the relationship.

While the duration and frequency of mentoring meetings varies, most mentoring partners meet or talk once a week for about an hour. The format and content of these conversations may vary, but

typically consist of brainstorming sessions to solve problems, updates and follow-ups on current projects, or more focused discussion of professional development topics. A mentoring relationship should not be considered an inside track to the top or an opportunity to complain; it is a respectful and professional relationship in which both parties can learn from the experience and each other.

As the relationship develops, mentees should remember to share their successes with their mentors and make sure the mentor knows how valuable their time and insight is. Remember that mentoring is about sharing knowledge and expertise in a way that benefits both of the participants and thereby helps to build and strengthen the nonprofit sector as a whole. As nonprofit professionals develop their leadership skills, it will be important to incorporate best practices into every mentoring relationship.

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