BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Emerging Nonprofit Leaders: "More Feedback, Please"

Author(s): David Simms

(This weblog post originally appeared on the Harvard Business Review website*.)*

Almost 200 next-generation nonprofit leaders joined 1,128 participants at Independent Sector's annual conference, held recently in Detroit. The folks invited to the conference were an amazingly talented and diverse group, all under 40, who already are making a difference in their organizations, in our communities, and in the world. Still, they were asking us how to advance their careers.

Michael Watson, the senior vice president of human resources for the Girl Scouts of the USA, and I were challenged to engage this group in a meaningful conversation. I say challenged, because neither of us were quite sure what two baby boomers could say that would resonate with these next-gen leaders. We need not have worried; the group helped us out. They were remarkably candid with their questions, comments, and willingness to dive right in.

For starters, while the great majority expected to be with their current organizations three years hence, almost none of those present thought they would stay 10 years. Why not, we asked? Consensus grew around at least one strong theme: the lack of constructive feedback in their organizations.

In fact, there was an astonishing agreement that the sector in general lacked both a culture of and mechanisms for candid performance feedback. People commented that we tend to be a sector filled with people who like to be "nice" to one another. After all, those who work in organizations trying to cure poverty, solve the education crisis, improve the environment, or serve disadvantaged kids are doing critical, dare we say God's work? How can these people be "criticized" for performance?

What these young leaders recognized is that without candid feedback, both praise and developmental in nature, we deprive our teams, our organizations, and ourselves of the information needed to get better. Most, however, admitted that neither they nor their organizations were building cultures valuing feedback and seeking continuous development.

If the next generation of nonprofit leaders more actively seek and deliver feedback, they will not only advance the missions of their organizations but more readily find ways to advance their careers. Only time will tell, but the energy and enthusiasm in the room was contagious.

What other advice would you give to the next generation of talented nonprofit leaders? Does your organization have a culture of caring, candid feedback? If so, how is it encouraged? If not, are you seeking and providing such feedback anyway?

- What Are the Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards?
- What Are the Responsibilities of Individual Board Members?
- Sample Nonprofit Business Plans
- Director of Development (Small Organization)
- Business Planning for Nonprofits: What It Is and Why It Matters

Recommended by