

## The Benefits of Diverse Experience in Leading a Nonprofit

There is an ongoing debate in the nonprofit world about whether individuals who have developed their leadership skills in the social sector are more or less qualified to lead an organization than their peers coming from the corporate sector. But according to a study by Antoinette La Belle, the discussion is misleading. Ultimately, La Belle's findings maintain that it is less a question of someone honing their leadership skills in the for-profit or nonprofit sector. "The better question," she said, "is whether executive director candidates have had a diverse set of experiences in their careers, and how they have handled, adapted, and grown from those experiences."

La Belle's research was part of her doctoral work at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. For the study, she surveyed 631 nonprofits leaders about their backgrounds and their organizations.<sup>1</sup> The organizations ranged in size from less than \$1 million in revenues to greater than \$25 million in revenues, with roughly 46 percent within the \$1 million to \$5 million range. Organizations surveyed also came from a variety of fields, with 44 percent from health/human services; 38 percent of the organizations also were 25 to less than 50 years old. The leaders of these organizations were asked to rate themselves using behavioral repertoire measures based on the Competing Values Framework first introduced in the early 80s by Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh.<sup>2</sup>

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1 "Nonprofit Leaders and Their Organizations: Routes to and Repertoires for Effectiveness," asked nonprofit leaders 95 questions about themselves and their organizations, including questions about their backgrounds including which sector(s) the majority of their career experience came from, the sector in which they most recently worked, and whether their current role was a lateral or promotional move, as well as their organizations' strategic condition, size, and revenue growth, among other questions.

2 The Competing Values Framework was first introduced by Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh in the March 1983 *Management Science* article "A Spatial Model of Effectiveness Criteria: Towards a Competing Values Approach to Organizational Analysis." It has been extensively used in research and further refined and developed in subsequent books and publications, including Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn's 2005 book *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework* (Jossey-Bass) and 2007's *Competing Values Leadership: Creating Value in Organizations* by Kim Cameron, Robert Quinn, Jeff DeGraff, and Anjan Thakor (Edward Elgar Publishing). In a 2009 *Leadership Quarterly* article authored by Katherine Lawrence, Peter Lenk, and Robert Quinn, the framework went from evaluating eight roles to 12.

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Specifically, La Belle asked nonprofit executive directors/chief executive officers (and others in equivalent roles) to assess their skills on four dimensions: Collaborate, Create, Control, and Compete. Within these quadrants, leaders were asked to score themselves in 12 managerial roles. For instance, in the Collaborate quadrant, leaders were asked how strong they felt they were as facilitators, mentors, and empathizers; in the Control quadrant, leaders assessed their skills as regulators, monitors, and coordinators. (To see more, please refer to “Competing Values Framework used for behavioral repertoire and culture assessments”, Appendix A.) How they perceived their strengths and weaknesses defined their behavioral repertoire: leaders with average scores across all roles were noted as behaviorally balanced; leaders with higher than average were noted as behaviorally complex. Those leaders who assessed themselves highest were considered better prepared to effectively address the varied responsibilities and situations involved in running a nonprofit organization.

La Belle, a former managing director at Lehman Brothers and longtime member of several nonprofit boards, said she had expected to find differences between leaders based on which sector they had worked in previously. Instead, she found virtually no difference based on that criterion. Overall, however, those nonprofit leaders with the highest self assessment across a variety of roles tended to have varied multi-sector experience.

### **Self assessment a useful process**

Interestingly, nonprofit leaders who participated in La Belle’s study reported that the process of assessing themselves was helpful in its own right, giving them an enhanced perspective about what it takes to succeed as a nonprofit leader, and sometimes teaching them something about their own work styles, strengths, and weaknesses.

According to Aaron Hurst, president and founder of [Taproot Foundation](#), and one of the nonprofit leaders surveyed by La Belle, the research affirmed his belief that varied experience—whether career, life, nonprofit, or for-profit—enhances the adaptability and flexibility that many nonprofit leaders need to effectively lead their organizations. “Diverse life and professional experiences are important to developing new skills sets, adapting to new dynamics, and to leading change,” he said.

The survey also affirmed what Hurst had known about his leadership skills. “I am more of a brash entrepreneur,” he said, “My impatience makes it hard for me to do well within the collaboration category.” To become more balanced, he has built a team that compensates for the nonprofit leadership skills he is weaker in, and complements those in which he is strongest. “Enhancing my own skill is 25 percent of the answer, and 75 percent of the answer is building a team to help me most effectively [and with the most

impact] drive the mission of the organization,” Hurst said. “Collectively, we are able to be whole.” (See [“Strongly Led, Under-managed”](#) for more on leading a nonprofit.)

Ana Oliveira, president and chief executive officer of [The New York Women’s Foundation](#), and another nonprofit leader whom La Belle interviewed, found that she learned some surprising—and useful—things about herself through the survey process. “I live in the quadrant that is more the facilitator, mentor, collaborative person, with some of the coordination and control,” she said. “What I found was that actually I was more of a competitor than I thought I was.” She added, “That’s been very healthy and very productive for the Foundation.” In fact, according to Oliveira, she used her competitive side to help reinvigorate the Foundation in 2009 by launching enhanced grant-maker partnerships during the downturn. “I channeled that energy in a way that produced outcomes,” she said. The result was a 22 percent increase in grant making, and, Oliveira said, “This year we’re going for another 21 percent increase.”

“There is something very innovative and important in Antoinette’s research about complexity—the ability to deal with complexity and deal with difference,” Oliveira reflected. “Working in one environment and working in another environment increases a breadth of skills you can call forth at different times,” she said. In her own career, which has spanned government and nonprofit roles, Oliveira has worked with complex issues with complex constituencies. “I have worked in nonprofit and governmental organizations that themselves are dealing with issues that are pretty much on the edge—dealing with substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, HIV, women’s issues, people of color issues, gay community issues,” she said. “The fact that the constituencies, the funding, the cultural space that such issues and populations occupy have made the management of those organizations very complex,” she added.

## Implications

Embracing diverse skill sets and exploring the breadth of skills that can be called forth at different times is important to being a nonprofit leader, La Belle concluded. With that in mind, La Belle thinks one possible implication from her research for nonprofits seeking new executive directors (EDs) is to cast a wide net when conducting searches and to place an emphasis on finding candidates with diverse skills sets and experiences. Search committee members and boards should then look carefully at each of the candidates’ resumes to see whether they have played a variety of roles during their careers and then ask questions to understand the environment the candidates were in when they played those roles.

“[Search committees] need to focus on what the candidates have done with the set of experiences and situations that they have dealt with in their careers so far,” La Belle said. “Really mining that, and

understanding not only what accomplishments they have achieved but also how they have handled, adapted, and grown from situations they've dealt with in their careers, will give search committees a greater sense of how candidates may succeed once they are in the role.”

The idea of casting a wider net resonates with Hurst. Having worked in both the for-profit sector as a social entrepreneur as well as in the nonprofit sector has given him a solid foundation on which to lead Taproot. “Working in two different environments has made me more adaptable and has given me more ways to solve a problem,” he said.

Oliveira finds the idea of casting a wider net is beneficial, as well. “I recently had the opportunity to sit on a search committee looking for a candidate for an [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] foundation,” she said. “The candidate we landed on is not the typical candidate, meaning not from a nonprofit or philanthropy.” According to Oliveira, the complexity of the role led them to thoughtfully consider the candidates’ life experience, leadership experience, as well as sector and professional experience. “I was so proud that the committee was interested in [those things],” Oliveira said.

Besides better understanding where the candidate is coming from, it can also help to learn about how the candidate intends to approach his or her potential new role. When La Belle interviewed 21 of the leaders surveyed about their transition process into the role of ED, she discovered that leaders from both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors said their entry strategies centered on listening and learning, commencing staff assessments, and establishing work priorities. However, one key difference was that those from within the nonprofit sector said they relied more on senior staff and sector colleagues for advice in their early days while those originating from for-profits relied more on key board relationships. A second difference between the two was that those with a for-profit background experienced a stronger sense of personal change vis-à-vis their prior role, even if the move was a lateral one.

Taking this information into account, noted La Belle, can help organizations create plans to help new nonprofit leaders adapt to the cultural differences of the organization and build key relationships beyond the organization. As the study suggested, “The hiring of a leader should not conclude the work of the selection team.” (See “[Onboarding: Tips for Transitioning into a Senior Nonprofit Role](#)” for more on this topic.)

The study also has an important message for senior nonprofit leaders and for mid-level managers who aspire to become EDs: “Everybody needs to be managing his or her own career development,” La Belle

said. “They should be seeking out experiences and situations within their careers and lives that will help them grow and develop as professionals, and develop a broader behavioral repertoire.”

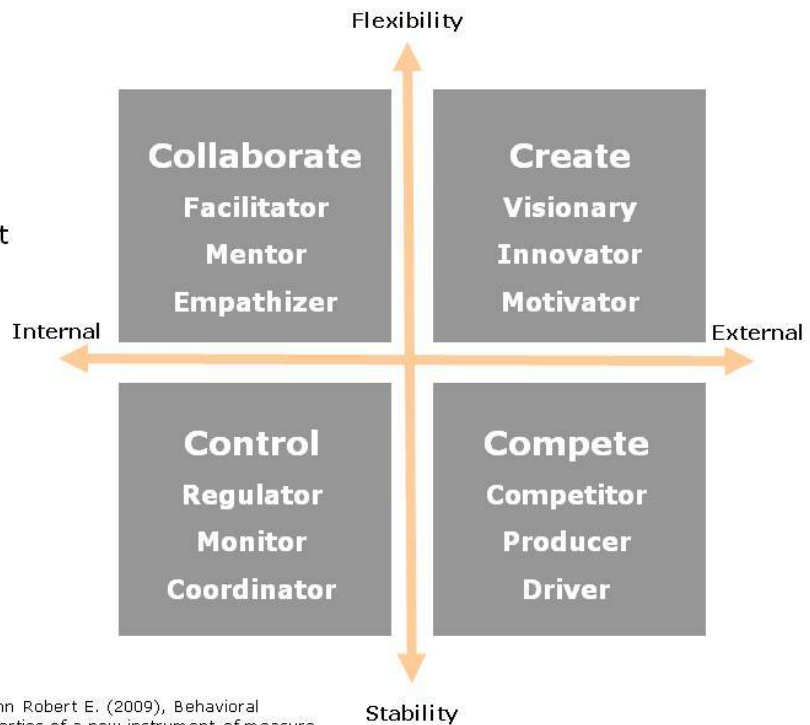
*Antoinette La Belle graduated in May 2010 from the Doctor of Management Program at the [Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University](#). In addition to her philanthropic work and her prior role at Lehman Brothers, her professional experience is in the areas of organization development and human resource management. Further questions about the research, which received survey administration support from the Bridgespan Group, may be directed to her at [antoinettelabelle@msn.com](mailto:antoinettelabelle@msn.com).*

**Bridgestar** ([www.bridgestar.org](http://www.bridgestar.org)), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.

## Appendix A

### Competing Values Framework used for behavioral repertoire and culture assessments

- Two dimensions create the quadrants
  - Focus: internal/external
  - Structure: flexible/stable
- Value creation per quadrant
  - Collaborate: long term
  - Create: new
  - Compete: fast
  - Control: sustaining
- Shared relationship with adjacent, not diagonal, quadrants
  - Leader/organization paradox=manage all quadrants
  - 12 BR roles/three per quadrant



Source: Lawrence, Katherine A., Lenk Peter, Quinn Robert E. (2009), Behavioral complexity in leadership: The psychometric properties of a new instrument of measure behavioral repertoire, Leadership Quarterly, v20, p87-102.