

What Makes for a Successful Leadership Development Approach?

Nonprofit leaders have complex jobs. In order to excel in their roles and drive results, these leaders need ongoing support from funders and key partners. While there are no perfect leadership development approaches, GEO has found three key characteristics make them most effective: focusing on developing *collective* leadership of teams within and across organizations, ensuring that leadership development support is *contextual*, and providing *continuous* support for growth.

The Case for Leadership Development

Evidence has shown that strong leadership is central to achieving these goals and can affect the overall performance of a nonprofit. Leadership can influence the culture of an organization and the ecosystem in which it operates. It can build the capacity of the organization as a whole and dictate the kinds of partnerships and networks that are built in communities and across sectors. Grantmakers seeking to support the development of strong nonprofit leaders can have difficulty designing the right approach.

As the nonprofit sector grows larger, more professional and more visible, there is a higher demand for accountability and an increase in competition for limited public dollars. Nonprofit leaders are expected to steer their organizations through these difficulties by building internal and external relationships, learning from their experiences and those of their peers, and by making critical decisions that can alter a nonprofit's strategies and direction.

For more on this topic, see [*Investing in Leadership, Volume 1: A Grantmakers Framework for Understanding Nonprofit Leadership Development*](#), (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2005) and [*Investing in Leadership, Volume 2: Inspirations and Ideas from Philanthropy's Latest Frontier*](#), (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2006).

An executive director often must play many roles: leader, visionary, manager, fundraiser, spokesperson, human resource professional, chief learning officer and more. For many grantmakers the link between strong executive leadership and organizational performance is frequently discussed and widely accepted. The larger question of what makes a leadership development approach “work” is more challenging.

The Three Cs

GEO’s research suggests that leadership development approaches holding the most promise to improve organizational performance share three important characteristics: they are collective, contextual and continuous.

Collective

Programs are designed to nurture collective leadership, either by strengthening the leadership capacity of cross-organizational networks or by working with board and staff teams from specific nonprofits.

Example: [Blue Shield of California Foundation’s Executive Excellence \(Ex2\)](#) program is part of their Clinic Leadership Institute, administered by UCLA’s Anderson School of Management. The program is designed to enhance and expand the leadership skills and effectiveness of community health center executive teams. The program focuses on advancing leadership, strategic, fiscal, communication, innovation and change management skills while also building the region’s network of community health centers.

Contextual

Leadership development embraces an action learning or learning-by-doing focus, supporting and creating opportunities for participants to apply acquired knowledge and skills to real challenges facing their organizations.

Example: [The James Irvine Foundation’s Fund for Leadership Advancement](#) provides flexible and tailored support to executive directors of individual grantee organizations. This support can take on many forms from executive coaching to attending executive seminars. The foundation encourages leaders to apply the new skills and knowledge they acquire within their organizations.

Continuous

Moving beyond one-time trainings, grantmakers instead provide ongoing support to nonprofit leaders — through coaching, consulting and continuing financial support — to help ensure impact on organizational performance.

Example: [The Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund's Flexible Leadership Awards](#) engage executive and senior leadership as well as board members in a variety of activities, from board training to coaching. The foundation also selects small pools of nonprofits to receive multiyear awards, recognizing that it takes time and patience to significantly improve leadership. This grant is supplemented by general operating support to sustain and grow core programs and operations.

Conclusion

The challenges of nonprofit leadership require a remarkable degree of skill, knowledge, wisdom and talent. By supporting leadership development programs that nurture collective leadership, promote contextual learning and develop strategies for continuous support, grantmakers can facilitate the strengthening of individuals, organizations and the sector as a whole.