



# Six keys to leveraging corporate leadership experience in your nonprofit

by Crystal Stephens, Director, BoardWalk Consulting

---

There often is a natural, yet unspoken, tension between nonprofit and for-profit entities. Stereotypes portray corporate executives as unemotional and tied singularly to bottom line profits, while nonprofit executives are seen as passionate but undisciplined. Yet there is interdependency between both sectors and a growing appreciation for leveraging the best of both worlds.

BoardWalk has had the privilege of working with hundreds of nonprofit clients and 6-10 times as many search committee members as they grapple to determine if candidates with a corporate background represent a good fit and, if so, how best to take advantage of their vastly different experiences.

Approximately 20% of BoardWalk's placements are former corporate executives, many of whom have contributed to this article. We've learned a great deal from watching the best of them succeed.

In this article, we outline six ways your nonprofit might capitalize on the skills and experience of a corporate executive.

## 1. Make Sure the Mission Matches

Many corporate executives reach a point in their career when they are ready to move "from success to significance," in the words of *Halftime* author Bob Buford, and they view leading a nonprofit as the natural next step. Yet the central role mission plays in the work of nonprofits is often underestimated. The hours are long, the needs are great and the funds are limited.

When considering a corporate hire, evaluate your candidate's connection with and passion for this mission. Look for evidence--of active involvement in relevant volunteer activities, active support of relevant causes, or a direct personal connection to your mission through a life experience.

1. **Make sure the mission matches.**
2. **Frame fundraising in the context of multi-year goals.**
3. **Make use of metrics.**
4. **Tap into talent management techniques.**
5. **Seize the sense of urgency.**
6. **Honor humility.**

*Example:* One former corporate executive, a man who himself experienced homelessness for nine months as a child, led a nonprofit that helped people experiencing homelessness find new life opportunities. This executive drew upon his personal experiences to remain grounded in the mission when he grew impatient with the speed of progress. These experiences also made the executive a credible and passionate advocate and fundraiser. His corporate experience made him a great executive; his passion for the mission made him a great leader.

**“His corporate experience made him a great executive; his passion for the mission made him a great leader.”**  
*–Said a nonprofit CEO,  
and former senior marketing executive*

## **2. Frame Fundraising in the Context of Multi-Year Goals**

Fundraising is the life line of any nonprofit and just as critical as meeting profit and revenue objectives in the corporate world. Corporate executives need to understand nonprofit fundraising cycles and be adept at personally communicating the value proposition of the nonprofit. They must be comfortable in the role of Champion-in-Chief.

Many nonprofits are excellent at annual fundraising and setting long-term visions, but few have the experience of developing and executing five year, or greater, financial plans that undergird the strategy. The for-profit executive has lived by a disciplined approach of establishing and adhering to long range financial plans which support a vision and strategy. This disciplined approach can be a valuable asset to help nonprofits sustain and grow services over time.

*Example:* The simple process of developing a long-range financial plan necessitates thinking strategically about the business model and evaluating the most effective way to deliver services. A former Fortune 100 executive and nonprofit CEO stated, “You have to evaluate what business models are most effective in delivering mission-critical outcomes.” The process of long-range financial planning often leads to needed structural changes enabling more efficient use of resources, targeted fundraising and greater impact.

## **3. Make Use of Metrics**

Metrics are the guideposts for large corporations. A common refrain is “You must inspect what you expect.” To inspect it, you must measure it. Yet, in a world where mission is the mantra, metrics can be viewed as imposing and cold. However, if one changes the lens and looks at metrics as a way of ensuring impact and enabling the best use of limited resources, metrics can be a nonprofit’s best friend. Increasingly, funders welcome data that

quantifies impact, and nonprofits are best served when they are able to hold themselves accountable for delivering upon their mission.

*Example:* A long-standing nonprofit leader with extensive corporate experience stated quite simply, “If you don’t have the data, you can’t make the sale.” Another CEO cautioned, “Just remember every data point has a face.” Donors love data, and your mission will profit as well.

**“Just remember: every data point has a face.”**

#### **4. Tap into Talent Management Techniques**

Many nonprofits are started by leaders who are passionate about addressing a particular need. Yet, once that leader departs, the organization falters. Corporate managers are evaluated not just on performance but on effective use of the organization’s most valuable asset: its people.

Succession planning is a must if the mission of the organization is to outlive any one individual. A natural byproduct of succession planning should be an employee base developed and prepared to continue the important work of the organization. Evaluating and holding employees accountable for performance, and having the courage to move them on gracefully when they fail to meet requirements, is a necessary, respectful and caring practice. People who don’t further the mission ultimately limit themselves and the organization.

*Example:* A former corporate finance executive and nonprofit CEO declared, “Nonprofit does not mean unaccountable.” His experience is that many nonprofits struggle with holding staff accountable. Yet, when he clearly explained desired outcomes and gained agreement, people responded favorably. “Good performers appreciate being part of a successful, results-oriented group.”

**“Nonprofit does not mean unaccountable.”**

#### **5. Seize the Sense of Urgency**

Many nonprofits may be drawn to a corporate executive in part due to a perceived sense of urgency and decisiveness that comes with the for-profit sector. If an organization is in need of change, seize on this perception and support the urgency to execute.

*Example:* A former marketing executive shared “The for-profit exec brings the cultural belief that the for-profit sector is more dynamic, has greater

urgency, is more decisive, more impatient and more innovative. It may or may not be true, but that is the perception. So use it! It is expected and, in a way, wanted by the board, so let it rip. Much will be accepted and forgiven.”



## **6. Honor Humility**

The Type-A personality of many corporate executives can be an advantage for a nonprofit. Ensuring the leader comes with a good dose of humility and the ability to create an environment where different skills and experiences are valued will make the difference between success and frustration or failure.

*Example:* The former CEO of a successful public-private real estate investment services company, who had spent the decade prior at a for-profit enterprise stated, “My personality didn’t change – Type-A, driven. But how I applied it, and opening up to others, made a big difference. They saw I had a passion for what we did and I understood a part of the world they didn’t - corporate, financial, legal, deal making - which in combination with their understanding of poor, underserved communities could actually add value and advance our cause together.”

BoardWalk has been blessed to have worked with hundreds of leaders dedicated to serving the community and impacting lives every day. Marrying the mission of nonprofits with some of the core competencies of corporate leaders can serve to make your organization stronger and your mission more effective.

Please share your experiences hiring corporate executives for your nonprofit, and we will include them in a future article.

---

*Crystal Stephens is a Director at BoardWalk Consulting. Crystal joined BoardWalk following careers in executive search and corporate sales and marketing.*

*Crystal was most recently an Executive Director at Russell Reynolds Associates, an executive search firm. Prior to this, she spent over 15 years in corporate sales and marketing as VP/EVP with IBM and Monster.com. She has served on the boards of several nonprofit organizations, including the Georgia-based chapters of the Boys and Girls Clubs and the Woodruff Arts Center’s Young Audiences. Crystal holds a Bachelor’s of Science from Northwestern University and an MBA from Emory University. She may be reached via email to [Crystal@BoardWalkConsulting.com](mailto:Crystal@BoardWalkConsulting.com).*