



New England Network



Partners in Leadership

Goodbye, Hello

A Generation of Executives Reflects on Retirement
and the Future of Services for Children and Youth

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Interviews conducted by Nancy Jackson
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New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services

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New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services (NEN) is a private, not-for-profit training and research organization that works with over 90 child- and youth-serving agencies in New England to strengthen programming and promote best practices. NEN's areas of expertise include information management and outcome evaluation, fund development training, youth development, spirituality and youth, transitional housing for adolescents, and runaway and homeless youth.

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Introduction

In 2005, the New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services (NEN) conducted a series of interviews with several long-time directors of child- and youth-service organizations in the region. At the time, we were simply on a fact-finding mission. We knew that a number of our colleagues – executive directors at these agencies – were nearing retirement, and we wanted to learn more about this upcoming transition, whether agencies were responding proactively, and if new leaders were being cultivated. And although we didn't start out with the intention of writing a report about



In our field, charismatic founders and longtime executive directors are extremely influential – in addition to providing a wide range of skills, they are community movers and shakers and the keepers of our history, our experience, and culture. When an executive director decides to retire, finding a successor can prove daunting.

these interviews, that all changed soon after we began. Beyond gaining an understanding about the current state of leadership development in the field and how agencies are preparing to replace retiring leaders in the near future, we learned, through personal, one-on-one conversations, what constitutes success, how the field has changed over the years, and even the importance of maintaining a good sense of humor!



Since 2000, NEN has become increasingly concerned about the change of leadership that will affect the youth services field over the next decade. Many of New England's youth service agencies, which were founded and came of age in the 1970's and 1980's, will lose their founders and executive directors over the next five years, as the nation's 77 million baby boomers begin to retire. A 2003 study conducted by Nonprofit Quarterly reported that 15 to 35 percent of nonprofit executives plan to leave their jobs within two years and 61 to 78 percent plan to leave within five years.¹ And who will replace them? It's hard to say. Only 38 million Gen-Xers are coming along behind them, far too few to fill the executive ranks. The next generation after that, the Gen-Yers, will still be too young and inexperienced to assume leadership positions.² This is worth worrying about because the delivery of youth services has become increasingly complex over the past ten years, because government and private foundation funding is becoming more scarce, and because child- and youth-service agencies provide our young people with a wide range of critical, life-saving services including shelter, emergency intervention and prevention services, life skills education, and employment programs. The loss of key leaders increases the challenge of effectively developing and delivering these services to young people across our region.

1 Hinden, S. (2003, Feb. 23). In Nonprofit sector, transition to the top. *Washington Post*

2 Teegarden, P.H. (2006, May). *Shortage decade: Where will the next generation of nonprofit leaders come from?*, Guidestar.org Newsletter. 6 (5).

In our field, charismatic founders and longtime executive directors are extremely influential – in addition to providing a wide range of skills, they are community movers and shakers and the keepers of our history, our experience, and culture. Consequently, when an executive director decides to retire, finding a successor who will inspire and please the board, the staff, and the community can prove daunting. This is further compounded by increased competition for leaders from both the nonprofit and for-profit sector and the fact that the current generation is smaller, in terms of sheer numbers, than the baby boomer generation. Moreover, today's younger executives tend to stay in their positions for shorter periods than did their predecessors.

So, knowing all this, we talked with some of our most experienced executives. We peppered them with questions about success, and effective decision-making structures, and the skill level and culture of the incoming workforce.

And, in the end, in addition to having these questions answered, we came away with fascinating stories, insights into the nature of leadership, and new ideas for cultivating future leaders. Not surprisingly, we were impressed – and we learned all over again about the power of self-reflection and dialogue.

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Although we are facing the imminent exodus of experienced leaders, committed and skilled youth service workers and managers continue to join our ranks. At NEN we are hopeful that the information shared through these interviews will spur cross-regional dialogue and lead us towards developing innovative and effective strategies for preparing, sustaining and cultivating a network of emerging leaders who will invigorate the youth services field over the next decade. ■



Melanie Goodman, Executive Director
New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services

Interviewees

NEN's former Executive Co-Director, Nancy Jackson, who is now an independent consultant, conducted the 15 one-on-one interviews with executive directors from NEN-member agencies in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Participants were selected for the Partners in Leadership (PIL) interviews based on their agency's affiliation with NEN, their position in the agency, and their experience and longevity in the field. At the time of the interviews:

- All of the participants were executive directors
- Five participants were directors of large agencies with budgets in excess of \$12 million
- Five participants were directors of mid-sized agencies with budgets between \$6-\$12 million
- Five participants were directors of smaller agencies with budgets under \$2 million
- All of the participants were at least 50 years old
- All of the participants had worked in the child- and youth-services field for at least 20 years
- Participants had between 6-27 years of experience in the position of executive director
- Ten of the participants were men and five were women



Lois Barry
LUK Crisis Center
Fitchburg, MA



Al Monier
Rumford Group Homes
Rumford, ME



Maurice Boisvert
YOU, Inc.
Worcester, MA



Michael Ostrowski
Child and Family Services
Concord, NH



John Boyd
Connecticut Jr. Republic
Litchfield, CT



Carl Pendelton
Sweetser, Inc.
Brunswick, ME



Rosemarie Burton
Klingberg Children's Center
New Britain, CT



Bob Rowe
New Beginnings
Lewiston, ME



Joe Leavey
Communities for People
Somerville, MA



Shari Shapiro
Kids in Crisis
Cos Cob, CT



Chris Small
Italian Home for Children
Jamaica Plain, MA

Cynthia Price
Brookline Community
Mental Health Center, Brookline, MA



Mike Tarpinian
Youth Alternatives
Portland, Maine

Carole Shomo
Youth Continuum
New Haven, CT



Jack Weldon
St. Vincent's Home
Fall River, MA

Key Discussion Points

Each interview focused on key aspects of leadership development, including:

- Executive attributes
- Executive preparation
- Identifying future leaders within the organization
- Grooming future leaders
- Senior management structure

On a more personal note, participants also were asked about their journey to the “top job,” their experience as a non-profit executive director, and what they believe their agencies needs to continue to thrive and be successful. The information that emerged from the interviews coalesced around a few broad themes: Traits, Qualities, and Skills of Successful Leaders; Tools & Tricks of Leadership; the Gap between “Old School” and “New School” Leaders; Managing the New Workforce; and Agency Growth & Need for Transparency. On some questions, most notably on the need for transparency, a broad consensus emerged in participants’ views. On other topics, participants provided diverse perspectives. This report strives to capture both the variety of opinions expressed as well as points on which many of the participants agreed. ■

Traits, Qualities, and Skills of Successful Leaders

When asked to describe characteristics or skills that have contributed to their success, the participants most frequently credited their “people skills” and willingness to be open, involve others, and be team builders. As one participant said, “You have to come across as someone who wants to attain mutual goals with staff, someone they can work with and who will be fair.”

acquired these skills in different ways (some on the job and some through professional education), they all agreed that today’s successful manager has to be well versed in many different areas. Fiscal and accounting knowledge were seen as essential, with participants mentioning a variety of specific areas, including managerial accounting, investment management (endowment),

staff, and develop and work with a board of directors.

While all the participants spoke about drawing on their professional education, they did not share a common educational foundation. Among the participants were social workers, individuals with advanced degrees in business administration, licensed therapists, and people with a general liberal arts background. Even more than formal education, almost all of the participants felt that on-the-job training was critical, coupled with ambition, youthful energy, love of the work, and aptitude to manage. “My training was on the job,” said one director. “The school of hard knocks was the best learning mechanism. My mistakes were painful, but I learned from them.”

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According to the interviewees, important factors included a good sense of humor, not taking oneself too seriously, and listening to others.

Many participants felt that having “passion for the work” was invaluable, especially if combined with concrete skills. While participants

knowledge of “numbers,” knowing how to make a profit and manage financial systems, and “knowing how to break even, year in and year out.”

Several participants also spoke about the need for directors to have basic business skills, such as knowing how to construct a business plan, hire

A theme running through many of the participants’ stories was that of trial by fire – gutsy determination overcoming youth and inexperience. This is how Chris Small described his ascent to director: “The most salient item that prepared me to be an executive was the wisdom, aggressive nature, arrogance, and energy of

those who made this happen, those who employed us and who I learned from. Before we were 25, we were directing programs. No one had run them before.... I got those opportunities twice before I was 30 and then was in pretty good stead to move into systems at a higher level. I can look back today and see that we were moved into positions we were not remotely qualified for.”

Many participants spoke about the need to engage in ongoing training, to always keep abreast of new developments in the field, and to “keep it fresh.” As one participant said, “You have to know the work and the product. Join professional associations, and work with the families of the children being served.”

Several participants attributed their success to the influence of strong mentors. According to one participant: “I had great mentors along the way, even a boss who really didn’t like me. But she dragged me kicking and screaming through the ranks and continued to promote me. She wouldn’t let me say ‘no.’ ”

Beyond concrete management skills and strong people skills, participants felt that their success also could be attributed to a range of other qualities, probably best described as qualities associated with leaders. Persistence, seeing

opportunity, taking risks, meeting challenges with enthusiasm, conveying passion, and inspiring others were some of the characteristics that participants felt contributed to their success. Though they weren’t yet leaders, they acted like leaders: they were direct, fearless, and clear. As one

These traits were probably best summarized by Chris Small, “At the core [of the executive director’s success] is a Peace Corps mentality: native intelligence, flexibility to respond, partner, and fight with government . . . a powerful social, political belief system.”



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participant described it, “I never had a problem going to my supervisors and asking how I could get their jobs. They always showed me the way and were very helpful.” (Mike Tarpinian)

In all the interviews, directors also talked about working hard. “I’ve been in the line trenches; I wouldn’t ask anyone to do something that I wouldn’t do myself,” said Maurice Boisvert. Another said, “I had a willingness to do what it takes. I was accustomed to and habitually involved in fifty- to sixty-hour work weeks.”

Still another participant said that being well-organized is key; although you need to work hard, “you have to be able to delegate.”

Sticking to core principles, embracing the values of the field, and being scrupulously honest were other attributes that some participants cited as central to their success. ■

Tools & Tricks of Leadership

Management Structure:

Many of the participants felt that having an effective management structure was a key component of their success as a leader. Effective management structures were seen as having two critical elements: the senior management team and a board of directors. Some participants actually described having a tiered “management team” structure, with second- and third-tier management teams working in tandem with a senior management team. Interviewees said the most successful management teams have decision-making power, meet regularly, are totally transparent with respect to information exchange,

participant said, “Management skills have to do with ... always closing the loop, saying thank you, and having a great management team.” (Maurice Boisvert)

Another had this to say about his management team: “They [6-member management team] are in on the decisions that matter about their programs, strategic planning. There is nothing that they are not part of; if I am not here tomorrow, I have full confidence that they can do this job, maybe even better than me.” (Bob Rowe)

Most participants described feeling pleased with their board of directors, and, in general, boards

effectively manage and anticipate leadership transition issues.

Accountability Mechanisms:

In general, participants felt that historical credibility had not played a central role in their organization's current stability and success. Several participants talked about being judged in the moment and being held to a different standard than in the past, without full appreciation for the difficulty of the work and client.

Rosemarie Burton said, “The focus of the work is much more demanding today. It used to be that no one ever questioned whether a program was good or bad; we were annually refunded.” This sentiment was echoed by Cindy Price, who, referring to regular monitoring by government funders, said, “People monitor in a much different way now. The frequency of monitoring is much higher.”

A number of participants cited the COA (Council on Accreditation) process as important in measuring organizational performance and enabling them to identify transition issues and broader agency policies leading to long-term sustainability. At the same time, no one mentioned using human resources software or



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and follow a formal meeting structure. Participants saw the management team as essential to facilitating problem-solving and the exchange of information and ideas. As one

were seen as offering a high level of support, mentoring, genuine concern about the client, and commitment to the mission. At the same time, smaller boards were considered less likely to

other succession planning tools. A few agencies have used Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) tools to help enhance existing programs, improve effectiveness, foster a collaborative work environment, and tap the expertise of staff and volunteers. First applied in manufacturing and later expanded to service organizations, quality initiatives are slowly growing in popularity among youth service providers as a way to increase agency impact and effectiveness.

Fundraising: As federal and state grants continue to be cut, more agencies are competing for limited funds and fundraising is becoming increasingly difficult. Participants said that negotiation skills are critical and that managing financial decisions is a complex, 360-degree process. All but one participant expressed concerns and anxiety about raising money. Most participants felt that boards are unhelpful with fund development, but they also seemed resigned to limited board involvement in this area.

Identifying Emerging Leaders:

Interviewees all agreed that finding new leaders is essential. Joe Leavey asserted, "I say you need someone who can stand up and personify the mission, the realm of possibility – preserve the agency, be financially stable."

At the same time, many interviewees have few or no leaders waiting to take over the helm – there are often only one or two managers waiting in the wings, and sometimes

management staff are aware of the list, and all of the individuals on the list are engaged in ongoing discussion about their career path, educational needs, and requirements for moving

One agency uses a 'star' rating system to identify up-and-coming talent. 'Stars' are in their 40's to 50's and have demonstrated leadership for a long time; 'rising stars' are in their 30's or early 40's and are on the leadership management track; 'shooting stars' are relatively new to the organization, but show potential.

none at all. And even those managers are themselves reaching retirement age. Moreover, many participants expressed the feeling that clinical staff and social workers tend to be uninterested in moving into management positions or assuming the directorship.

In order to build leadership among staff, several agencies have established methods of identifying possible future leaders. One agency uses a "star" rating system to identify up-and-coming talent. "Stars" are in their 40's to 50's and have demonstrated leadership for a long time; "rising stars" are in their 30's or early 40's and are on the leadership management track; "shooting stars" are relatively new to the organization, but show potential. All of the

up to the next level. The agency offers support to potential leaders, including paying for education and training and involving them in statewide or national networks. Chris Small described his efforts to move a promising leader into positions and experiences that will aid her career path:

"I found one.... She is going to run someone's organization – probably won't stay long enough for me to retire. We are partners – we have the same power and authority within the corporation. She answers to me, the Board voted to dual-authorize – contracts, check signing, etcetera. She speaks for me, acts, has the same authority in my absence. The partnership has become real." ■

The Gap between “Old School” and “New School” Leaders & Youth Workers

The interviewees reflected on how managers today are being prepared for their profession and whether the approaches being used satisfy the requirements of leadership. There was broad agreement that people coming into the field today are more likely than their predecessors to have developed one or more management specialties. While this specialized knowledge can be useful

tend to focus on narrow issues, don't always see the “big picture” or understand the connection between different aspects of management and leadership. Yet seeing the big picture – the interplay between the organization and its environment, was identified as a critically important responsibility of any executive director. Carl Pendleton said, “Emerging leaders tend to focus on a targeted area –

for specialization because, typically, individuals on management teams bring expertise in different areas. For youth-service agencies, the challenge is selecting senior management staff who bring multi-faceted executive abilities as well as a passion for children and youth, strong interpersonal and leadership skills, and vision.

According to participants, while new leaders tend to have strong skills in areas like grantwriting, planning, and clinical work (sometimes even stronger than the executive director's), experienced leaders are more confident taking risks and seeing the big picture. Experienced leaders also tend to have considerable clout in the community and in working the political landscape.

Emerging leaders are more cautious; lamented Rosemarie Burton, “How do you get people to be braver?” Indeed, this is no small problem. Many participants identified the ability to take risks early in their careers as pivotal to building their leadership potential. But today's new leaders find themselves in a more bureaucratic environment, and

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in addressing the need for concrete skills in particular areas, it does not necessarily enable emerging directors to respond to the overall pressures and complexities involved in managing today's nonprofits. Participants tended to agree that today's incoming managers and potential executives

they're more myopic. Good leadership takes a different set of skills. One is not better or easier than the other. It's like preparing the vegetable dish versus the whole meal.”

Some directors also felt that management teams provide a more effective way to address the need

bureaucracies don't yield many opportunities for brashness and fearlessness. And if courage never has a chance to develop, it may simply not be there when it's needed.

Many of the participants talked about the swift evolution and changing requirements of the executive director's job. More than ever, today's CEO needs to understand and be comfortable with complex systems and partnerships, be politically savvy, and have business sense. Partnerships – organizations coming together to get the job done – present new opportunities for organizations and require new leadership approaches. “The autocratic, energetic executive director of old doesn't fare well in building partnerships,” Mike Ostrowski said.

Moreover, as new accountability standards are being put into place, executives are being required to call upon their business savvy: “It's a business and it's no longer 'hold hands and sing kumbayah.' If you don't have the stomach to run IBM, then you don't have the stomach to run a non-profit,” said Mike Tarpinian.

Shari Shapiro agreed. “There is a need for directors not to react; emotions cannot drive the decision-making. Directors must look at all angles after taking a deep breath, decide which battles to fight, and shoulder things that frustrate them.” ■



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Managing the New Workforce: Different Times, Different People

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New staff members say, 'I'm here because I like your mission, I'll come in and do the job and get out. Don't bother me with committee work, extraneous stuff.'

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Just as leaders have changed over the years, the new generation of staff now entering non-profits is bringing a different set of characteristics than those brought by their predecessors. Participants reported that some of their younger staff members are detached from reality, feel entitled, are poor writers, and are less willing to come in on the ground level and learn. As one CEO said, “They know it already and want to be paid top dollar.”

Another commented, “[There has been a] Herculean change of the workforce; just as Baby Boomers were proud to be from their generation, Gen X'ers are also proud to be their generation.” (Carl Pendleton) While many younger staff members have an affinity for the organization's mission, their life is not all work.

Speaking in the voice of new staff members, one participant said, “I'm here because I like your mission, I'll come in and do the job and get out. Don't bother me with committee work, extraneous stuff.” At the same time, participants are seeing more marginal individuals applying for direct-care positions, and with that comes a whole different set of assumptions and challenges: “It used to be I'd see two CORI's [mandatory criminal record checks] a year that were any concern at all; now we see a pack a week.” (Jack Weldon)

In response, agencies are teaching their staffs to behave more professionally by holding them to clear expectations about being on time and dressing appropriately. One agency strives to improve staff writing skills by editing the written work of

new staff members during their first six months. Agencies are also becoming increasingly responsive to the changing needs of their staff members who have families by accommodating day care and school schedules. ■

Agency Growth & Need for Transparency

Many of the participants alluded to the difficulty of managing growth as their agencies became larger. Some even described growth not as a natural outcome of success but as a “necessary evil.” And maintaining size can be stressful, they said. Agencies of all sizes – and especially those in financial straits or facing intense competition – often find it challenging to stay focused on their core mission. Mission creep is the inevitable consequence of chasing after every grant that comes along, even if it doesn’t fall squarely into the agency’s mission. Several participants described how important it is to look at the agency’s mission at every step of the way when making strategic decisions.

In the face of ever-growing organizations and complex decision-making structures, participants felt that being transparent (sharing full information) and providing total exposure to agency operations and decision-making is critical. On several occasions, different interviewees talked about having “no secrets” and making sure that senior staff are privy to “everything.” With rare exception, involving emerging leaders in joint

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decision-making, board meetings, and policy making also was seen as fundamental to cultivating engaged and informed leaders. As Rosemarie Burton said, “We are planning another [staff] reorganization.... As I am doing this, I am working with folks that are in the succession plan. We look at what makes sense for our organization. I ask them ‘what is it that you would like to inherit?’ to get them to think strategically early on.”

Although participants are all well aware of the need to plan ahead, cultivate leadership, and manage change, most conceded that many agencies – and particularly smaller ones – are not incorporating transition planning into their management practices. ■

Conclusion

As youth service agencies anticipate the coming years, most will need to grapple with the inevitable exodus of some of their most cherished and charismatic leaders and founders. While any change can be stressful, the loss of visionary leaders is particularly challenging. At the same time, this transition provides an opportunity to define what the field needs from today's new leaders and to increase the participation of staff and volunteers at all organizational levels. In addition, as organizations over the past decade have increased in size and evolved in complexity, many have already been faced with the need to cultivate new or different talent and to think creatively about how to stay true to their core mission and values. As the field moves ahead, its parting leaders can provide invaluable experience, insight, and strategies for tackling these tough issues. Not only are they mentors to emerging leaders, but they are potentially mentors to the agencies of the next decade.

We are especially grateful to the directors who agreed to be interviewed for this report. Their willingness to speak personally, eloquently, bluntly, and with remarkable insight about both their struggles and achievements was inspirational. Our dialogue on this issue continues – as does our work to cultivate and prepare leaders who are capable of meeting the challenges of the new century. In this task, we agree with Al Monier: “If you are not growing and moving ahead, you are a sitting duck.” ■



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