

Young Workers Seek Ways to Improve Nonprofit Work Force

By Candie Jones

As nonprofit groups increasingly compete with business and government employers to attract young workers, many people in their 20s and 30s are pressing charities to improve salaries, offer greater opportunities for career development, and do more to promote the diversity of their work forces.

In follow-up conversation to a [survey](#) of 1,650 released by the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network last year, which found burnout and low salaries threatening to drive young charity workers away, members of the group held a conference here to discuss how they can bring about changes that will reshape nonprofit organizations in ways that make them more inclusive and give greater opportunities to emerging leaders.

“Our hope in pushing the conversation forward is to figure out what we can do as individuals and as a network to impact talent development,” said Josh Solomon, managing director of alumni engagement at Teach for America, in New York, and co-chair of Young Nonprofit Professionals Network’s national board of directors. “We’ve got to talk about solutions, not just further diagnose the problem.”

Robert Egger, president of D.C. Central Kitchen, a social-services charity in Washington, called on the nonprofit leaders at the meeting to consider that the solution is not just to make the nonprofit world bigger, more self-sufficient, and more sustainable.

“You all have completely got to redesign charity in America, 100 percent, top to bottom,” he said, adding, “There’s no big pot of money out there that’s going to allow you all to get paid a good wage unless you go out and develop it. What I see in your generation is a desire to see your spirituality, your income, and your lifestyle mesh. It doesn’t exist yet, and I think a lot of people come to the nonprofit sector thinking, I’ll find it there, and can be a little discouraged.”

Salaries and Opportunities

While many young nonprofit workers are discouraged to find that their paychecks fall short of their earning potential at businesses, Paul Schmitz, chief executive of Public Allies, a charity with headquarters in Milwaukee that trains young people for public service, said the gap is often perceived as being larger than it is.

“Most business is small business. And really, when you compare apples to apples, the average nonprofit to businesses the same size, the nonprofits pay well,” he

Chicago said. “We don’t compare ourselves to the \$13-million manufacturing company down the block, so we have this entitlement belief that we should be paid like Goldman Sachs.”

In addition to seeking higher wages, young nonprofit workers are looking forward to more professional-development opportunities, especially through leadership structures that encourage shared responsibility among staff members at all levels, said conference participants.

Mr. Schmitz praised the value of charity workers developing their careers with a variety of jobs and professional experiences.

“One thing nonprofits need to be thinking about is not just career ladders but monkey bars,” he said. “Sometimes it’s not about moving people up but moving people around and also creating monkey bars to other organizations.”

Safiyah Jackson, a member of the Chicago branch of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, and an education fellow in arts and culture management at the Chicago Community Trust, can attest to the benefits of cross-organizational career maneuvers.

Before she earned a master’s in education and pre-kindergarten child care, she had already received her master’s degree in business administration and worked for Ford Motor Company as a dealer consultant. She planned to open her own child-care organization but instead accepted an offer from the Chicago Community Trust to develop children and family educational programs and curriculums, a job she finds a perfect fit with her passion and skills.

“I’ll never leave the nonprofit world,” she said.

‘Intrapreneurial’ Spirit

Kim Caldwell, a member of the network’s national board, and a consultant to Greenlights for Nonprofit Success, in Austin, Tex., called on conference participants to tap into their “intrapreneurial” spirit, by promoting innovation first and foremost within their own organizations and existing roles, before going out on their own.

“I’m on the phone all the time with people who want to start their own nonprofits,” she said. “They have the energy, they have the passion, but they don’t have the connections.”

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Ms. Caldwell questions why more of these entrepreneurs don't take their energy and passion and put it into practice at an existing nonprofit organization, but she suspects she knows the answer.

"When it comes to our own ideas, we're not willing to take the back seat, we want the cookie," she said. But, she added, "Success is that our ideas get effectively implanted. That should be enough."

To keep in regular touch with the ideas and objectives of young nonprofit workers, Allyson Biegeleisen, another member of the network's national board, and director of client services at Commongood Careers, a recruiter in Boston that works with nonprofit clients, recommends a simple tactic.

"Every supervisor should be intimately familiar with at least three professional goals of those they manage, and those goals should be revisited quarterly and be directly tied to staff compensation," Ms. Biegeleisen said. "That way, if and when an individual gets to the point where maybe there isn't an opportunity for them to move up, then they hopefully now have a relationship with their supervisor, and it's not so awkward for anybody because they've been helping you the whole time to get there."

Yarrow Sandahl, co-chair of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network's national board, thinks that young nonprofit workers need to take more responsibility for driving their own professional development.

"I manage a team of five people who are pretty diverse in age, and none of them really own their own professional development," Ms. Sandahl said. "It's almost like the onus is on me to figure out their professional development, and I think that can be really frustrating on the part of managers."

'Admit Your Struggles'

She believes the same is true of mentor relationships; in last year's survey, young nonprofit workers expressed a yearning for more such contacts on the job. But well-meaning attempts of young employees to demonstrate their capability can sometimes prevent these relationships from occurring, said Mr. Schmitz.

"Often among young people they think the way to prove themselves as leaders is to prove they can do it themselves," he said. "The best way to get mentorship is to be vulnerable and admit your struggles. As a manager, the hardest thing to manage is people who aren't open about their challenges and weaknesses."

Mr. Schmitz also discussed the challenges the field has faced in creating a more diverse leadership; conference attendees pointed out that this is a challenge faced by the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network itself.

Faith Byone, program associate at the Bush Clinton Katrina Fund, in Washington, called attention to the fact that she is one of only two African-Americans on a board of 17 that oversees the network's Washington chapter. Such small numbers, she said, do not reflect the predominantly black city the chapter serves.

"When thinking about affirmative action within this organization itself, in terms of moving people into leadership positions within your local chapters, reach out to people who are in your community who may not be participating, affirmatively," said Richard Brown, vice president of philanthropy at American Express, in New York. "That's what it means, it means to actually go out and do it. And don't be bashful and don't be ashamed about doing it."

Mr. Brown believes that incorporating more diverse people and leadership practices into the nonprofit world requires changes at the board level.

"Boards need to become more diverse, not just in terms of people of color," he said. "The Council on Foundations needs to get funders to start talking about this in a much more proactive way to get their grantees to start thinking about how do you get more young people on the board so that you have a younger voice that actually represents this next cohort."

Mr. Solomon highlighted this goal among the network's top priorities. "The Young Nonprofit Professionals Network is a great peer-to-peer network, but how do we get our alumni onto other boards is the question," he said. "To see the changes we want to occur, we've got to get our message on other boards."

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