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Inching to the Top

Nonprofit managers who are minorities search for a quicker way up the ladder

By Michael Anft

Twelve years ago, when Michael C. Bright joined the YMCA of Central and Northern Westchester, in White Plains, N.Y., as a youth and family director, he set his sights on the local chapter's top spot.

"I told myself I'd lead the Y there or another one elsewhere by the time I was 40," says Mr. Bright, who is now 36. "It was just a question of how I was going to get there."

Mr. Bright, who is black, knows that for many nonprofit managers who are members of minority groups, moving into leadership roles can be challenging. Board members and hiring committees may not understand cultural differences, or they may have expectations of what a top executive should look and sound like. Often, according to many frustrated job seekers, those expectations don't include nonwhite candidates.

But Mr. Bright, now the chief operating officer at the YMCA of Newark and Northern New Jersey, has learned during his tenure at the Y that he has had a few things working in his favor: a chief executive who served as a mentor as well as a boss, an organization with a tradition of forming multiracial management teams, and a program started last year by the YMCA of the USA's national headquarters in Chicago that attempts to develop nonwhite leaders from within the organization.

The Y's program is one of a small but growing number of efforts now under way by charities and foundations to diversify the top ranks of the nonprofit world's leadership.

Mr. Bright is one of 29 people currently taking part in the national organization's Multicultural Executive Development Program. Senior managers at the Y's 1,966 affiliates across the country nominate people who demonstrate leadership potential to the national headquarters, which selects the participants.

The Y then assigns participants a senior-level leader who will coach them through a 12-to-18-month set of courses, retreats, and tests to prepare them to take the next step up the organizational ladder, usually to a chief-executive or executive-director position. So far, the national Y has trained and placed five of the 13 members of the inaugural class of 2006 in top jobs around the country.

The program has taught Mr. Bright about what his natural leadership style is, what he might consider changing about it, and how he can best navigate the interviewing process.

Perhaps just as important, he says: "Everyone around the table at the program is a minority member. We can share our experiences and bond over that, and discuss how we can get where we want to go."

Leadership Gap

While Mr. Bright's story is filled with hope, researchers and leaders of groups that have investigated whether a "glass ceiling" exists for nonwhite nonprofit managers say that programs like the YMCA's are rare.

The effects of federal laws banning discrimination and a desire within organizations to make their staffs mirror the populations they serve have helped increase the numbers of minorities who work at them. But few of those staff members lead their organizations or have been groomed to take on the responsibility of leadership.

With a mass exodus nationally of retirement-age nonprofit leaders predicted within the next decade, organizations are faced with a pressing need to train replacements.

Research shows that organizations have a way to go when it comes to preparing leaders who reflect America's shifting and increasingly diverse population.

Eight-two percent of nonprofit chief executives are white, virtually the same as the results of studies performed in the past decade, according to a study performed jointly last year by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, in San Francisco, and the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, in Washington. What's more, the 2006 study discovered that the same percentage of executives younger than 45 were white.

Some young managers who are members of minority groups say they already face doubts from supervisors and prospective employers about their abilities based on their age and level of experience. Ethnicity adds one more barrier for them.

In some cases, they say, their own bosses or other nonprofit leaders have made them acutely aware of their physical differences.

"I don't look like a typical nonprofit director to them," says Armando Rayo, the 33-year-old director of Hands On Central Texas, in Austin, a department within the local United Way that helps to raise money and bolster a corps of volunteers.

A first-generation Mexican-American, Mr. Rayo says he encountered a lack of what he calls "cultural competency" at his previous nonprofit employers. Organization leaders didn't understand his background or their own biases, he says, which kept him from moving ahead.

"I have a border-town accent," Mr. Rayo says. "People have this preconceived notion of what a fund-development person is like. If they haven't dealt with people of color, then you don't fit that notion."

Diversity Guide



Photograph by Bob Daemrich, for The Chronicle

INCHING TO THE TOP

Nonprofit managers who are minorities say they face challenges getting promoted to top jobs. Armando Rayo, a first-generation Mexican-American, says he has encountered bias on the job.

Role of the Board

In addition to cultural factors, many groups aren't aware of structural issues that may make them less likely to name minority members to high-level positions, says Ludovic Blain, a consultant who has conducted research on the issue for the Building Movement Project, a group in New York that helps social advocacy groups gear up for a generational transition in leadership.

Because the tone of an organization starts at the top, and because most nonprofit boards of directors remain overwhelmingly white, the people they hire usually are as well, Mr. Blain says.

Without concrete plans to make diversity in upper management a priority, or change the racial makeup of their boards, he adds, organizations will be too slow to integrate their upper ranks. "It's difficult for some to trust people who don't reflect them," he says.

Organizations with monochromatic leadership can scare off prospective leaders of color, Mr. Blain says. Several nonprofit workers interviewed for this article said they had met with hiring

committees composed entirely of whites, which they saw as red flags that warned them against accepting a job at an organization, even if the group employed minorities as staff members.

Other nonprofit workers say they have left groups that tend to stop promoting people of their race past a certain managerial level.

"It creates a distortion in the nonprofit world as people of color gravitate only toward organizations that are accepting of them," Mr. Blain says.

A shift in the criteria by which boards now select nonprofit executives may also be preventing many charities from diversifying their top leadership, says Paul Schmitz, president of Public Allies, in Milwaukee, which trains young people for careers in social justice.

"You've got these activists and social workers who built organizations, and they're being replaced by M.B.A.'s and fund raisers," says Mr. Schmitz. Boards, he says, are "hiring people who look like the people they want to raise money from."

Perhaps reflecting the concerns of the charities that hire them, executive recruiters may not be working as hard as they could to involve minorities in their searches, says Rosetta Thurman, director of development and finance at the Nonprofit Roundtable of Greater Washington.

"I don't think there's necessarily a glass ceiling, but there are a lot more people out there looking for top jobs than there are positions," says Ms. Thurman, who writes a blog, Perspectives From the Pipeline, that focuses on young and minority nonprofit professionals. "To deal with that, people need to do a better job of recruiting leaders of color. And headhunters may not be asking people of color to apply for those jobs often enough."

New Ideas

Diversity of the top leadership is not just about equity but also about adequately providing charity services, say some nonprofit recruiters and other experts.

Vincent Robinson, managing partner of the 360 Group, an executive search and management-consulting firm in San Francisco, says that his company has tried to steer its 40 foundations and other nonprofit clients toward viewing multiracial leadership as a way to make their organizations more efficient and innovative.

"Because they have different experiences, managers of color can bring fresh ideas and energy," says Mr. Robinson, who has worked for several charities and donors. He says he has seen improvement in recent years in the outlook for minority managers, especially those willing to look outside their organizations for leadership positions. But he also noted the resistance of some employees to hire them.

"There are people out there who believe that there are trade-offs involved in hiring someone who isn't white," he says. "That's not acceptable, so we challenge our clients on that."

Others believe that organizations should challenge themselves internally to find out why their boards and upper management don't reflect the populations they serve, and whether trade-offs do, in fact, exist.

"Organizations never have the honest conversation with themselves about why it matters to have diversity in leadership," says Emmett D. Carson, president of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, in Mountain View, Calif. "They need to talk about some unsavory things, like whether a black fund raiser may cost them some donors because those donors might not be as open-minded as the organization is. Can they live without that donor? Sometimes it's more about taking a risk than it is about race. And if someone who looks like the person who did the job previously is up for it now, why take the risk and hire someone of color? That's the kind of thinking we're facing."

Fellowships for Minorities

Along with the YMCA of the USA, a handful of other organizations have begun to search for ways to bust the glass ceiling. The Goodman Theatre, in Chicago, uses grant money from the Joyce Foundation, also in Chicago, to create minority fellowships that can help move managers of color up the hierarchy.

Other foundations have encouraged grantees to make sure they make diverse leadership a priority.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Baltimore, has led 50 of its grantees through an executive-transition program that includes succession planning, support for consultants, and advice on how to include members of minority groups in searches for new executives.

More of the foundation's grantees have since hired minority-group members as executives, but board diversity remains an issue, reports Patrick A. Corvington, senior associate in leadership development at Casey.

While some organizations have focused on how employers hire and promote, others have sought to help managers who are members of minority groups find new opportunities.

Last year, after Venture Philanthropy Partners, a grant maker in Washington, became troubled by the lack of diversity among the leadership of its grant recipients, it held roundtable discussions on how best to increase the flow of minority-group executives to Washington-area organizations that serve children and youth.

Leaders of 12 organizations met and decided to form the African American Nonprofit Network to improve the odds for managers who are black and seek executive jobs. The network, which

first began to meet formally in January, now counts 450 managers as members and reaches as many as 2,000 people through e-mail lists.

Wanda L. Pierce, the group's executive director, says she sees little evidence of a glass ceiling. "I see it more as a matter of people on both ends not being aware of opportunities," she says. "Organizations are hungry for minority leadership, but they don't know how to find it."

The African American Nonprofit Network is trying to change that by sending out bimonthly job-opening alerts to individuals and organizations in the Washington area and by notifying potential applicants of board openings. "When people say, 'We don't know any African-Americans we can interview,' we'll fill that gap," says Ms. Pierce.

Venture Philanthropy Partners has pledged up to \$500,000 to the group during its first two years, provided it meets certain benchmarks, such as the number of people who sign up for its e-mail list and the number of applicants it links to jobs.

But most regions don't have such a network to tap, laments Mr. Robinson of the 360 Group.

The nonprofit work force, he says, could use one strong multicultural, multigenerational group that would investigate the leadership-gap issue, among many others: "There's no one group that focuses on nonprofit career development in general and diversity in particular, and we need that."

One project, still in the planning stages, may help fill the gap. The Nonprofit Sector Workforce Coalition, a group formed last year of more than 60 nonprofit organizations, is hoping to create a Web site that tracks nonprofit employers' diversity practices in the same way that GuideStar, an organization in Williamsburg, Va., tracks financial data reported by charities.

Mr. Schmitz, chairman of the coalition's committee for diversity and inclusion, says his group wants to ask nonprofit organizations to sign a pledge to commit to diversity principles — and then report their performance in putting those ideals into practice. The proposed Web site would gather the data, presenting what he calls a "one-stop shop" for organizations seeking practical tips, job candidates seeking information about prospective employers' commitment to diversity, and members of the public seeking more information on their favorite charities.

The committee is now seeking a partner to create and build the site, he says.

Rising to the Top

For junior- and mid-level nonprofit managers who want to move up the career ladder, the best approaches are to watch for outside opportunities and serve as consultants to foundations and other groups, Mr. Robinson says.

Mr. Corvington urges job seekers to visualize future possibilities.

"Managers of color need to think more strategically," he says. "They should be O.K. with promoting themselves. If they see that their organization will be in transition in three to five years, they need to think about what they can do to reach that top level, including making social connections and getting more education, if they need it."

Nonwhite managers should also emphasize the vast array of experiences they have had, including ones that aren't traditionally associated with top nonprofit managers, and the additional value they bring to a position because of them, says Ms. Thurman of the Nonprofit Roundtable of Greater Washington.

"If an organization is serious about diversity, it should be able to say, 'Hey, this applicant hasn't taken a typical path, but they're who we're looking for,'" says Ms. Thurman. "Nonprofits have to be willing to change how they evaluate people so that people who have gained experience running church programs or their fraternities and sororities are recognized as being experienced."

Breaking down traditional barriers may help, but it will take time to get there, says Diana Campoamor, who has seen diversity efforts creep along as president of Hispanics in Philanthropy, in San Francisco, which represents grant makers who support issues of importance to Hispanic people.

"It's not for lack of talking about it or not wanting to do anything about it," she says. "It's about organizations and change — and that will always be an issue."