

The Process

With several research reports detailing the imminent loss of huge numbers of older, established leaders and bemoaning the lack of leadership among younger staff, it would seem obvious that leadership surfaced as a top priority for those in the sector. As such, it garnered a great deal of interest among delegates at the 2006 National Meeting, and a few months later a group was formed to discuss it.

The Leadership Working Group of the Nonprofit Congress began meeting in February 2007 to examine the status of leadership development throughout the sector and attempt to draw conclusions based on what they observed. Initial meetings focused on discussing the scope and magnitude of the “problem” and determining what age group it affected the most. The group discussed “emerging leaders” (those with less than 7 years of experience in the sector), “mid-career leaders” (those with 8 to 15 years experience), and “established leaders” (those with more than 15 years experience) and attempted to focus on one group. After more discussion, it became apparent that though leadership development resources might exist for each group, the resources they could provide each other might be even more valuable. The group concluded that capturing knowledge from established leaders, supporting transitions among mid-career leaders, and growing the leadership capacity of emerging leaders was necessary in terms of maintaining a thriving nonprofit sector. Perhaps even more important however, was getting these people to talk to each other and teach each other what they knew.

The key purpose of the group became gathering information on existing programs of intergenerational knowledge transfer in the sector and then compiling best practices based on the information. The group developed a list of questions to pose to the coordinators of various leadership programs (see Appendix A) and set out to get answers. The bulk of this report is based on interviews and surveys conducted by members of the Working Group. The following reviews describe just a handful of leadership programs across the country. They look at the programs’ purposes; benefits; recruitment and retention strategies; curriculum approaches; setup and requirements; resources; evaluation methods; and lessons learned. See the Executive Summary below for key highlights and suggestions.

These unique programs cater to leaders with various levels of available time, including everything from lunch seminars to two-year fellowships. Some target specific groups of leaders, such as young women or those in a certain geographic area. Many include board as well as management components. A few operate partly or completely online. To some extent, this variety of programs offers a “leadership buffet” from which participants can choose a program to fit their own needs. The participants learn from each other as well as experts in group settings, combining their fresh voices with the institutional knowledge of the sector. The programs described here are constantly evolving as they evaluate themselves, and new ones are being created as well.

We encourage others to test out the advice given below and send us any feedback and additional suggestions you may have.