

Older Leaders Worry About the Future of Their Nonprofit Groups

By Michelle Gienow

Charity leaders age 55 and older have concerns about what the future holds for their personal and professional growth, but they are even more worried about how their groups will fare when they retire, a new survey finds.

That may be the case in part because only 30 percent of the 266 people who were interviewed said that their organizations have done any succession planning.

Virtually all of the people in the study, which included some leaders who have already retired, said they wanted to continue working for charitable causes as volunteers or in more flexible paid roles. But just over half wondered if they would, indeed, be able to find a way to contribute after leaving their current positions, an indication of fears that the nonprofit world might not be ready to make full use of their skills.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming desire among older workers to continue making a difference is startling, says Phyllis Segal, vice president of Civic Ventures, a think tank in San Francisco that encourages older people to pursue public-service roles.

Studies of older people have long found that many want to volunteer after they retire. “We expected this number to be higher among people from the nonprofit sector,” she says. “But the near-unanimity of it was really unexpected.”

The survey of nonprofit workers, representing groups with a variety of missions, was conducted online by the Building Movement Project, a group in New York aimed at strengthening social-change nonprofits, along with Civic Ventures and Clohesy Consulting, in San Francisco.

Challenge of Pro Bono

The wave of enthusiasm—and the potential for “an abundance of pro bono executive talent”—creates a challenge for charities, says Ms. Segal.

“These highly experienced volunteers will be coming available at a rapid pace and on a scale that the nonprofit world is just not currently equipped to handle,” she cautions.

Shirley Sagawa, who helped create national-service programs as a Clinton administration official and has advised nonprofits on management, says that charities need to recognize and prepare for this unprecedented opportunity.

“Right now, we seem to equate ‘volunteer’ with lowest-common-denominator skills that almost anyone can do, while at the same time we get trapped into thinking the only way to get more complex needs met—in areas like development, finances, strategic planning—is to raise money and then buy those services,” Ms. Sagawa says.

A new perspective may be in order, she says. “Think about taking on these highly skilled nonprofit veterans as you would when hiring a fellow, rather than as volunteers,” she says.

She suggests that charities make a wish list and then seek volunteers to fill it, asking themselves, “If [your organization] got unexpected grant money and you could do anything you wanted with it, what would your top choices be?”

'Bottleneck at the Top'

For nonprofit executives getting ready to step down, the reverse of the challenge is to find a compatible place where they can continue working after retirement, whether for pay or as a volunteer.

While most want and expect to continue working in the nonprofit world, the survey shows that they also want to work differently than before. Nearly all of those surveyed (97 percent) said they wanted flexibility, such as working part-time or volunteering, while only 8 percent said they were interested in seeking a high level of responsibility in the future.

But the survey found that most older workers would take their time stepping down from their present posts: More than 60 percent of respondents expected to continue working for pay until age 70. About 8 percent told researchers they never expected to stop working for pay.

This state of affairs is having an impact on younger nonprofit workers who aspire to leadership roles, say experts.

“Younger generations can really feel the bottleneck at the top,” says Frances Kunreuther, director of the Building Movement Project. “Their takeaway from this survey should be: Older leaders do increasingly want to leave. But since they also want to continue making a contribution, they may be moving over rather than out.”

As younger executives take control of these nonprofits, says Ms. Kunreuther, it will help them to realize that “we are looking at a reversal of culture, where they need to figure out what would help them in their job and their mission when the boomer is no longer their boss but is now working for them.”

Bob Sable retired in 2011 after serving for 20 years as executive director at Greater Boston Legal Services, where he now volunteers as a lawyer and works for his successor, who used to work for him.

Although he intended to remain active in the group, Mr. Sable initially made a clean break: “When I stepped down, I really stepped aside. I didn’t go in for six or seven months. I was available to be consulted with, but I felt I would help the most by creating a little space before I came back.”

Mr. Sable says he’s seen other cases in which a departing leader never really left, creating confusion and conflict among the staff and potentially undermining the new head. “I didn’t want to put Jackie [Bowman, the group’s current leader] in that position,” he says.

Leaders' Anxiety

As they contemplate retirement, veteran leaders worry more about the future of their organizations than they do about their own personal futures, according to the survey.

Three out of five older workers have concerns about their own financial security, but 77 percent of them worry about their organization's financial survival after they leave.

But whether all that anxiety is justified remains to be seen, say experts.

On the one hand, "today's environment is vastly different from when many of these people began their nonprofit careers: It's much more strategy-dependent, competitive, and aggressive. So it is legitimate to have concerns about your organization remaining viable without you," says Gilles Mesrobian, a senior fellow at the Support Center for Nonprofit Management, in New York, and a consultant who has often served as an interim CEO at nonprofits.

Getting an organization ready for turnover at the top is part of a leader's job, he notes. "A good leader focuses on sustainability, and that extends to when they are no longer part of the organization," he says. "Having a succession plan is key."

On the other hand, he adds, anxiety about an organization's future may also be a sign of a veteran leader who simply can't let go. Nonprofit CEO's may be especially prone to this problem, he says, due to their commitment to a social mission.

Staying Relevant

The survey found that just over half of all executives worried about staying relevant after they retired.

"It's perfectly normal for them to have difficulty imagining the organization itself going on when they themselves will no longer be there," Mr. Mesrobian says. But, he says, simply recognizing the personal-identity issues at stake can help relieve such apprehensions.

For long-term nonprofit leaders, says Ms. Kunreuther, anxiety about their organizations may simply be endemic.

"Sustainability issues are the very thing they worry about every day in their job," she says. "It may just be their living and breathing way of talking about what absorbs them every day."

At any rate, she says, it gets better: "Once they leave, they let go, and things are OK. We had survey respondents commenting, 'I was surprised how little I worried after I left.'"

Full results of "The New Lifecycle of Work" study are available at buildingmovement.org.