



Professional Development is Not a Benefit, It's Essential

One of the most valuable elements of work for any employee is opportunity for professional development. It's essential to employee growth – a relationship agreement with your employer that says they will invest in you. And for smart employers, it's a part of the commitment to smooth succession and continuous improvement for the organization.

For non-profit sector employees, professional development opportunities may be the difference between a thriving career and a stagnant job. Cultures of abundance or scarcity should be identified, and learning how to leverage development opportunities, and how to recognize employers' degree of commitment can make all the difference.

The Q and A below features valuable thoughts from my professional colleague, Gerianne Puskas, MBA, CNPM, CFRE. As founder and CEO of Mission Advancement Group, LLC, Ms. Puskas is a strategic advisor for non-profit sector success with more than 30 years of experience in fundraising, non-profit management, strategy design, and communications. She partners with non-profits to put a strategy to Hope – aligning vision, people, and fundraising so organizations can advance their missions with confidence. She has led and advised award-winning campaigns recognized by AFPGV and AMA Rochester, NY, earned recognition as a 2024 Athena International Award finalist, and serves on multiple boards and committees across the Rochester, NY, region. She holds an MBA in Non-profit/Public/Organizational Management, and a Master Trainer Certificate with the Association of Fundraising Professionals - AFP Global.

~ Lydia Palmer, founder, Higher Purpose Financial

Q1. What do you feel underlies the challenges of professional development in non-profit sector organizations?

Puskas: There are two big challenges for non-profit staff pursuing professional development: Money and Time. When non-profit budgets are tight, professional development and training that is not required or mandated for certifications or licenses often gets cut out of the budgets at a department level, or even an organizational level.

The fallout from this is higher turnover, a less skilled workforce, and less trust in the workplace - not only among staff, but between staff and clients, which reduces outcomes.

This also impacts fundraising in the non-profits. Donors struggle with building trusting relationships with the organization amid high turnover. Campaigns and appeals change faces

and voices and the community can't attach as strongly as it could - therefore building that supportive relationship and providing higher levels of support.

Q2. How important are credentials to career building? Are they essential, or does the work a person has done matter more?

Puskas: This is a great question. Credentials are a valuable indicator of experience. For example, my CFRE (Certified Fundraising Executive) credential absolutely helped me in my fundraising career. There is an important distinction that comes with that - you often do NOT need to have an undergraduate or other degree in order to obtain professional credentials – you need experience in the field. In the case of the CFRE, it is based on time/experience and knowledge of the profession of fundraising. Therefore, your work history is VERY valuable in this instance and will help earn you the credential that will support your career in the field.

There was a point in my career that I was hiring MBAs and Ph.D. candidates. I grew fearful that I would not have the "weight" in my position for long, so I returned to school (part-time, adult learning) to get my MBA with a focus in Nonprofit Management. There I learned I had a masters level understanding of most things due to my experience in the field and just had to learn the names of the processes I was following. My confidence in myself grew quite a bit. When I graduated and put "MBA" after my name, external response was noticeable. Upon searching for a new position in the community, I secured interviews almost immediately and had an offer within two weeks. Sure, part of this was the environment, but I'm sure the letters made a difference (CFRE came after I had my MBA).

If you are able to obtain credentials through your employer, do it. People look for it. Even if you know the information and skills but don't have the credential, the letters are a signal to the outside world that you have accomplished something. Even if you did it before without the letters, it means more with the letters. I don't like saying that, but it's the truth. Remember, though, just the credential doesn't cut it. Real-life experience can't be replaced by letters.

One additional thought, as education evolves and adapts to the fast pace of change and knowledge development, and movements to “tear the paper ceiling” gain traction, credentials and certifications are gaining in their value. There are some views that, in the near future, these may carry even more cache as real education, because they are completed faster than additional degrees and can be very closely linked to the current work climate, demands, technology and regulations.

Q3: What should you look for in an organization that points to good professional development opportunities?

Puskas: I look for team members that are engaged in the community. That is putting their learning to work. When I was considering an organization, I would pick a few employees off LinkedIn and ask them questions (if I didn't already know someone in the organization) -

and I was sure to include questions about membership in professional associations, funding for conference attendance, local chamber memberships, etc. Those are all ripe with professional development and networking opportunities that keep your growth fueled beyond a learning opportunity.

If an organization has high turnover, they likely are not developing their entire team. If one level of the organization is stable and another volatile, there is probably not equitable access to development and other opportunities. Most people want to see a future – they want to grow. If they feel stagnant and trapped, they will burn out or bust out.

Q4: Are there warning signs that indicate it may be time to leave an organization for your career to progress?

Puskas: Yes, unfortunately. If you hear the words, "You are so valuable to us where you are." That is a tough one. That means you are bringing value (or money) and they are afraid to move you and take a chance on someone new. You are the unlucky by-product of their fear. Get out. Even if you are somehow able to move up, they will do this to you again in your next role.

Another warning sign is a very flat hierarchy. That means there is no place to move up in the organization. Some years ago, in organizational management there was a trend to creating very wide and very shallow organizations, with individuals cycling through short-term project leadership roles. It was democratizing decision making and management. But it also created an environment without true professional advancement. Watch, especially, if an organization is proud of their senior leadership team having been there for a decade ("look at our stability!"). No movement = no opportunity. Unless you can gain specific experience you can take elsewhere...avoid.

Q5: What should top leadership own in building a strong professional development path for employees?

Puskas: Top leadership needs to own the succession plan and future of the organization. They need to share their work, skills and knowledge with their employees to help develop the next generation of leaders. If they really care about the organization, and don't want it to falter in times of leadership transition, they will do this. Put it in your employees' performance objectives so they strive to grow - and you are held accountable to supporting that journey as well.

Yes, it costs money and time. Think about the losses - opportunity costs, morale and strategic - that occur when you do not have a candidate internally that understands the culture, strategy and future of the organization. Smaller investments in education, conferences and mentoring will usually have bigger returns than advertising and hiring externally. The positivity and growth experienced by the employee, and those that see that opportunity, is an investment in your culture as a learning organization.

Q6: What does the employee have to take on themselves?

Puskas: Employees need to advocate for their own growth. Ask your supervisor about their work - not how to get their job, but what did they wish they knew before they took the position, who was a good mentor to them, etc. And follow those threads for your own learning path. At the end of the day, we are all responsible for ourselves, and if nothing happens and we didn't ask why, who can we really blame?

Employees need to accept that growth can be uncomfortable or simply not fun. Things can be hard or take time. If you're a salaried employee, you may be studying something after hours because projects are taking up your day. This is up to you, but your progress is your responsibility.

Find a mentor or two. One in your company and one outside of your company but in your industry network. They will be great to learn from and help you navigate the industry.

Q7: Takeaways - what are 3 key things a non-profit sector professional should do to build their career?

Puskas:

- 1) Invest positively in the relationships around you. They will consistently re-emerge throughout your career when you least expect it.
- 2) Invest in yourself. Take in all the education you can around you in your role, at conferences and from constituents (customers, clients or donors).
- 3) Build your network. If you're shy, join groups that offer 5-minute networking or other activities. Go to local symposiums and sessions. Join a professional organization.

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