

Want to be Successful in Your New Non-profit Position? Start by Bringing Yourself On board

When it comes to onboarding, many candidates who are interviewing for a position with a non-profit assume this is the responsibility of the hiring organization.

Not so.

If you want to be happy and successful in your new position, you need to take personal responsibility for your own onboarding. This means learning the organization's culture, acquiring the necessary tools and initiating the relationships you need to effectively perform your new role.

While you don't have to create your own onboarding program from scratch, you do have to be proactive in ensuring that a potential employer understands the importance of onboarding and is committed to providing you with what you need to be successful. Since onboarding helps to align your expectations with those of your employer, it can have a dramatic impact on your satisfaction with your job and your performance.

Here's an example. A number of years ago I worked with Janet, an experienced and successful fundraiser and manager who had recently joined a national non-profit as Vice-President, Advancement. During her first week, in an effort to build rapport with her new colleagues, she invited each person to lunch or coffee. She was surprised to receive polite declines to every invitation, with several people mentioning they were too busy or working on deadlines.

Janet soon learned the organization did not have the type of supportive and collaborative environment that she needed to succeed. Within a year she was looking for another position. This time, she was determined to ask in-depth questions during interviews in order to clearly understand the organizational culture and assess whether she could succeed in the work environment.

So if you want to be engaged, happy and successful, get yourself on board the right way. Here are some ways to do this.

When interviewing for a position

Ask questions to ensure you'll be a good fit with the organization and the position; for example:

- Do you have a strategic plan? What is the status of the goals in this plan? Understand the big picture and how you fit into this plan.
- How would you describe the culture here? Is it collaborative, authoritarian? How are decisions made?
- What are the biggest challenges of this position and how do you think I can help to resolve these?
- What's my most important responsibility from management's perspective?
- For what responsibilities would I have full authority?
- For me to be successful in the role, who would I need to partner with?
- What resources and tools do you provide so that I can be productive as quickly as possible?
- What processes are used to evaluate performance?
- When I've succeeded in this role, what other opportunities are there here for me?

- Describe the kind of organization in which you believe you would work best; ask the interviewer in what ways this organization is similar to this.
- Do some due diligence. Ask the interviewer about the non-profit's successes, challenges and financial situation. Following the interview, verify what you heard with colleagues who know employees, volunteers, clients, suppliers or others who have worked with this organization.
- Ask the interviewer what the management/employee turnover rate has been over the past few years and the reasons why these individuals left.

When you have a job offer

In order to ensure this is the right organization and position for you, before making a commitment, take time to evaluate the offer. When you receive a verbal offer it's easy to become caught up in the excitement and accept the offer immediately. Instead, I recommend giving yourself time – ask for at least 24 hours to think it through and to do some due diligence.

- Check out the organization's reputation online.
- Meet with the hiring manager and ask probing questions such as:
 - Why do you think I'm the best person for this role?
 - Does anyone in the organization have concerns about this role?
 - What people and groups inside and outside the organization are most important to my success in this role?
 - Can I tour the environment where I would be working?
 - Can I meet the people I would be working with prior to committing to this offer?
- Be alert to red flags. In Janet's case for example, had she paid attention to early signs of problems she may have made a different decision. For example, prior to accepting the offer from the national non-profit, she requested the annual report to review the organization's financial statements. She did not receive these documents. She also correctly requested to speak with her potential new colleagues. Several people told her she would be expected to bring her Rolodex of donors, which was an indication the organization had unrealistic expectations for quick results. Unfortunately, Janet ignored these red flags and she was soon discontent in her new position.

If you're feeling uncertain about responses to your questions or requests, discuss these issues with a mentor or trusted source, someone who can be objective.

After accepting the offer and before starting

Once you've accepted a position and before you start, put into place a strong foundation that will enable you to quickly become productive.

1. Invite your new boss to lunch and make an effort to get to know him/her better.
2. Get up to speed on the organization by requesting information such as the strategic plan, financial statements, program information, organizational structure and job descriptions, board manual, schedule of events, etc.
3. With your boss's blessing, start building relationships; call and introduce yourself to the people who will be important to your success. Schedule meetings. Find out if there are any key events before or soon after your start date and try to attend.
4. Think about an action plan for your first 90 days to set direction and priorities.
5. Request what you will need for your office set up in order to be prepared.

6. Plan a message that communicates your goals, priorities and expectations and conveys how you want others to perceive you.

The first day

- Make a positive first impression. Be visible and focus on acquiring an understanding of the organization and the office. Ask questions and listen.
- Build rapport with colleagues. Be friendly with everyone you meet and open-minded about ideas and suggestions. Share your knowledge without imposing it on others. Ask for help when you need it and thank those who provide it.
- Consistently communicate the message you crafted.
- Begin building key relationships with employees, team members, board members. Invite them for coffee or lunch. Ask them who they believe it is important for you to meet both inside and outside the organization. Reach out to these individuals as well.

The first 90 days

- Define success for yourself. Set short-term goals that show what success will look like in 30, 60 and 90 days.
- Acquire a thorough understanding of the culture of the organization before making any major changes – especially if you're from a for-profit culture. If you act prematurely, you could negatively impact your fledgling relationships.
- Connect with mentors. If there are no internal staff members who are experienced and willing to serve this role, seek relationships through your professional associations. Serving as an objective sounding board, a mentor will provide you with vital feedback and guidance as you tackle new challenges.
- Manage your progress. Regularly review your goals, action plan and milestones to determine how you're faring and to make any adjustments that may be necessary.

By proactively managing your transition to a new organization and a new position, you can deliver results faster and better for your employer while enjoying greater satisfaction with your work. So go ahead, if you want to be successful in your new non-profit position, start by getting yourself on board.

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