

Chrystal Kornegay and Mossik Hacobian: Leaders and Partners at Urban Edge

Name: Chrystal Kornegay

Position: Deputy Director

Start Date: 1999 (became Deputy Director in 2005)

Education: BA, Urban Planning, Hunter College; Master in City Planning degree, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Previous For-Profit Experience: Not significant

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Eight years in community development prior to Urban Edge

Name: Mossik Hacobian

Position: Executive Director, Urban Edge

Start Date: 1977 (became executive director in 1986)

Education: BA, Columbia University; three years at Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University

Previous For-Profit Experience: Several years drafting in an engineering office early in his career

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Community organizing and renovating abandoned houses in East Boston

Organization Information: Community development corporation (CDC); founded in 1974; located in Boston; approximately 80 employees; \$6 million budget (including both core operations and property management)

In 2005, Chrystal Kornegay became deputy director of Urban Edge, a community development corporation working in and around the Boston neighborhoods of Roxbury and Jamaica Plain. (Deputy director is one of the titles that Bridgestar includes under the general heading “the COO role” for purposes of our interest groups and our resources around key roles¹.) Kornegay had begun working at Urban Edge as a project manager in 1999.

¹ For more information on the COO role and how it is defined, please see “The Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer”, www.bridgestar.org.

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Mossik Hacobian, who joined Urban Edge as a housing rehabilitation specialist in 1977 (three years after its founding), and became the executive director (ED) in 1986, tapped Kornegay to serve as interim ED while he was on a sabbatical and to fulfill the new role of deputy director upon his return. He used the sabbatical, which was part of a fellowship he received from the Barr Foundation, as an opportunity to advance the organization's succession planning and leadership development.

In addition to Hacobian and Kornegay, Urban Edge's management team includes the director of fund development, the director of property management, and the chief financial officer. The director of property management reports to Kornegay and the other positions report to Hacobian.

Bridgestar: What do you see as the roles of the deputy director and ED in your organization?

Hacobian: This goes back to the Barr fellowship experience, which has altered our thinking about leadership transition and leadership distribution within the organization. When the fellowship and sabbatical came along, we concluded that instead of having an interim ED while I was away, we needed to create a deputy director position...because of the anticipated growth trajectory of the organization.

This is where I come back to the question of leadership transition. . . .I'm happy to stay as long as I add value, but at some point I'm going to be too tired, [and] I don't want to wait for some sort of an emergency. I think increasingly, successful organizations are organizations where leadership is distributed, where they're not relying on a single strong leader. If Urban Edge is going to continue to be successful, there needs to be leadership exercised to a much greater degree in many levels of the organization. And I think the reason we have been successful is that, to some extent, that's true now. If everyone were dependent on Chrystal and me, we would not be successful. We are intentionally looking for strong management team members who can be leaders in their own right. We are encouraging everybody within the organization to take more initiative. So that's the context for what we're trying to do.

Having been in this field for almost 40 years and at Urban Edge for almost 30 years, there is a lot of history and relationships, and part of my objective is to share as much of that as possible with Chrystal and others in the coming years so that the relationships don't die when I leave the organization at some point. Not just that they continue to benefit Urban Edge, but that the network of relationships continues to be intact for mutual benefit.

[Hacobian jokingly sums up his succession strategy:] I do less and less on more and more things, and my goal is to do nothing on everything. And then Chrystal's job would be the reverse of that. Chrystal does everything on everything.

To some extent, I see us evolving as co-executive directors. I don't see us as having the traditional inside-outside division.²

The other thing that's happening at the same time is, Urban Edge is a large CDC—one of the largest in New England—but it's highly leveraged and it has no liquidity. So one of the things we have decided is that I have to spend more time with the fund development director to create a fund for Urban Edge that allows it to be more liquid and more sustainable over time. To some extent, the needs of the organization, in terms of its potential growth and its infrastructure needs, are such that one person can't do everything that the organization needs at this level. So that's the job that we're dividing up and trying to still define. I'm not sure that either of us could write a definitive job description for the other, but I think the two of us are sharing that set of responsibilities and to a large extent are each other's advisors and sounding boards. We have others, but if there's one person I consistently consult with, it's Chrystal.

Kornegay: I agree that the role is evolving and has been evolving over time. Mossik knew what he wanted it to look like at the end, but it wasn't clear how we were going to get there. Right now, I would describe our roles [by saying that] I do more of the programmatic things in the organization and he does more of the operational things. But even that is evolving, because ultimately we want to end up in this place where he is spending more of his time [raising new] money. That leaves a whole organization that needs to be run. I think our styles are definitely different—I'm less likely to operate in a way that anybody sees me as that one strong leader.

I hardly ever feel that he is in my business. He more often feels that I won't let him make a decision without questioning it.

How do you think other people understand your roles?

Kornegay: The thing I have realized as I have been thinking about it recently is that he and I have less need to have clear definitions about who does what than everyone else around us does.

Hacobian: One thing Chrystal and others [often hear] me talk about is my soccer team experience. In soccer, regardless of what your title or your position is, either you work well as a team or you don't. I have less need to define titles and positions, as long as the team works.

² A common approach to defining these roles is to have the COO oversee all of the organization's internal operations and programs, freeing up the ED to focus on external matters such as fundraising, public relations, and partnerships.

Kornegay: So we disagree on that. He has less need of [role definition] because he's the team captain, [but] as the team captain, you have to think about what everybody else needs. I have less need of it in relation to him—to know who does what and who is called what. We just have really different styles. Mossik is very—I hate to use the word, but—visionary and aggressive and he overreaches. And because ultimately I and everyone else have to deal with the consequences of that overreach, I'm always trying to get him to slow down. That's what my questioning every decision that he makes is about. [I often say to him:] "It's great, but the train is going really, really fast and you're dragging us all along. Could you just slow down? We'll get there. It's okay."

Hacobian: I think one of the challenges that we have as this relationship evolves is how other folks—both inside and outside of Urban Edge—view where the buck stops. If somebody thinks that if they don't like what Chrystal says, that somehow they can get a different answer from me, then they still think of me as the person to come to. But I think it's increasingly true that people inside and outside the organization see Chrystal as the last word on an increasing number of things over time. In a perfect world, anybody who works for Urban Edge—whether they're a custodian or the executive director—can represent the organization and be the last word. The two of us are at the early phase of that. Ultimately, everybody on the senior management team and everybody at the next level out should be able to represent the will of the organization, the weight of the organization. And I think to establish that internally and externally is an important part of this idea of a distributed-leadership organization.

Kornegay: If people think that talking to me is the same as talking to him, then it makes it easier for them to take my word as the word of the organization. So I work really, really hard to make sure he knows who I talked to and what I said, even around the smallest things, because he may run into somebody. It's one of my pet peeves—I always tell my staff, "Don't let me be somewhere and have someone tell me you did something and I don't know what they're talking about. We all have cell phones and email—just tell me." So to the extent that people believe that talking to me is the same as talking to him, I think that makes it easier for people to take my word as final.

Hacobian: The sabbatical was an opportunity for us to shake things up a little, so I didn't want to go back to the way things were after I came back. . . .The idea was to transition leadership of elements of the organization to her.

Kornegay: [There were some people who came to me even before the sabbatical and the title change, but] some people, you're never going to change. In any relationship, there are ways you can behave, like, if you call for an appointment or a conversation with Mossik and he has me call back, that sends a

message. There are some people who, you just have to say to them, “You can go talk to him, but you’re not going to get a different answer, and you’re going to [make me angry, or make him angry.]”

How did you figure out how power and responsibilities should be shared between you?

Kornegay: It wasn’t difficult.

Hacobian: There is a very high level of trust between us...

Kornegay: ...and respect...

Hacobian: ...and that makes things a lot easier.

How did you build that trust and respect initially?

Kornegay: We talk a lot, I guess. All those Saturdays at work talking about race and politics and soccer and deals and people—all of that matters. Mossik spent a lot of time with me [at the beginning], so there’s a level of personal investment that I didn’t even think about at the time, but in retrospect, it makes a difference.

Hacobian: It’s not just the talking though.

Kornegay: We are who we say we are.

Hacobian: We deliver. We’re direct. We tell each other what we think. We don’t say what we think the other one wants to hear, so you know you’re always getting an honest perspective. There’s a lot of respect. There’s caring about what we’re trying to do.

In my experience, a key ingredient is being honest: being honest with yourself, being honest with other people. It’s another one of these things that is never absolute. To the degree that it makes sense, [you have] to be honest with each other. But most importantly [you have] to be truthful to yourself—not play games, not pretend. Without that, I don’t think any of this is possible.

Kornegay: Our relationship is not just professional; it’s also personal.

Hacobian: We regularly have dinner together with my wife. So there’s a personal, social element, which isn’t always there in professional relationships.

What are the biggest challenges in your relationship?

Hacobian: I don't know that I can answer your question. I feel that I have had a wonderful time and opportunity at Urban Edge and working with Chrystal, so I don't think of anything as a real challenge or obstacle. To me, everything is a matter of degrees of success. I presume an outcome, and the question is how close you get to that. If you try hard and you succeed—or you learn something because you didn't succeed or it took longer or it cost more—as long as you learn the lessons and apply them to the next thing, you're successful. It's a question of how you define success.

Kornegay: The biggest challenge for me is the way we deal with staff. We have very different approaches to staff.

Hacobian: In terms of management of staff, I'm more likely to be patient with people, and I admit sometimes I'm patient too long, and I should have pulled the plug sooner, but I like to invest the effort in people and give them the opportunity to become whatever they can become, and hopefully it will match our needs as an organization. But sometimes I wait too long to give up on people.

Kornegay: And that's a wonderful thing.

Hacobian: I hate to give up on people, or on anything.

Kornegay: I don't think of it as giving up. I think of it as the organization's need and the person's capacity to meet that need today. Because in the absence of their capacity to meet that need today, the need is still there and it's going to have to be met by somebody else, and "somebody else" is usually me. So then I have a problem—because I already have a full-time job. And it's hard to build a team when there are people on the team who aren't playing their role; it frustrates the other team members. . . . So because he's the way he is, I end up feeling like some jerk because he's this lovely, wonderful person who doesn't give up on people, and I'm the one who has to say, "It's time to go—I'm not working on Saturdays and Sundays because this one can't do the job."

The other thing that's good about our relationship is that we have a shared vision for the relationship, the organization, the leadership. We share a lot of the same personal values, but we're also very different in how we get there, so the relationship gets to benefit from his being really patient about some things and my being impatient, or his being impatient about some things and my saying, "Wait, slow down."

Any other advice for people in partnerships like yours?

Kornegay: As close as we are, I think part of the reason it works is that we have a small group of external people who want to see us both be successful. When I can't quite figure whether I'm being too sensitive about something and I want to say something to him, there are people I can call who know and respect him. I don't have to feel like I'm betraying something. You have to have people who are invested in the success of what you're trying to do.

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