

Hiring a Bridger into the COO Role: Reflections from the Field

Founded in 1981, The Greater Boston Food Bank (www.gbfb.org) is the largest hunger-relief organization in New England, and is in the top 10 percent of food banks nationally. The staff of 65 and a volunteer network of 12,000 acquires, inspects, sorts, warehouses, and distributes 24 million pounds of food annually to more than 600 hunger-relief agencies in eastern Massachusetts, in a dedicated partnership to feed the region's hungry. Since 1995, The Food Bank has grown 12 percent per year (compounded), and is planning to build a new warehouse to help keep pace with demand for its services.

Catherine D'Amato, president and CEO, joined The Food Bank in 1995 after serving at the Western Massachusetts Food Bank and the San Francisco Food Bank. The recipient of a variety of community awards for her leadership role in the fight to end hunger, she also serves on the boards of The Boston Foundation, Boston Public Market and New Market Business Association. Catherine earned a Bachelor of Arts in Theology from the University of San Francisco and Business Management Certificates from Harvard Business School and Smith College.

Carol Tienken, chief operating officer, has been with The Food Bank since 1999. A bridger, she was at Polaroid Corporation in Domestic and International Marketing for 18 years. Carol was also an employee member of the Polaroid Foundation for five years, working on grant responses for the Boston-area Community Committee. She grew up in Sub-Saharan Africa as the daughter of an American diplomat, and has undergraduate and master's degrees from Northwestern University.

Bridgestar: Catherine, this is the story of Greater Boston Food Bank's experience in hiring and assimilating a bridger. However, it is also the story of your decision to create a Chief Operating Officer position. So, first: what circumstances led you to this decision?

Catherine D'Amato: In the Fall of 1998 – and again today – The Food Bank was in a period of unprecedented growth, and we needed stewardship over our procedures and protocols in order to manage the business effectively during this growth period. We knew that without someone experienced in helping organizations achieve efficiencies and stretch their dollars, we would not be able to achieve our goals. In addition, we realized that I needed to spend more time expanding our ability to respond to our constituents and fund raising.

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How was The Food Bank managing operations at the time?

D’Amato: We had a director who was responsible for operations, with my support. And, again, we were doing a good job. But we knew that in order to achieve our mission in a more real way, we would have to make some changes in our internal structure.

Once you decided to hire a COO, how did you scope the position?

D’Amato: We did several things. We observed the recruiting activities of organizations recruiting at the “C” level – the United Way, Morgan Memorial, and American Red Cross. We also got some help from an outside consultant. And, most importantly, we created clear responsibilities and objectives for the position.

And did you reach out to potential bridgers specifically?

D’Amato: No, not specifically. I had met Carol when she worked at the Polaroid Foundation; she came out to meet us on a site visit. And then, as we were beginning the search, Carol had decided to make a change. She reached out to me as part of her own networking process, and the match was made.

Carol, what about interviewing at The Food Bank struck you?

Carol Tienken: When I reached out to Catherine I didn’t know that she was looking for a COO, but I had been attracted to the mission of preventing hunger, and I was impressed with The Food Bank when I worked with them while at Polaroid. I knew that they were growing rapidly and that there were challenges; that was exciting to me. In the interview process I met – quite literally – everybody in the organization. The process went from November to April. But there was a group interview with all my potential direct reports that turned out to be invaluable.

Probably the most important thing, though, was that Catherine had a chart ... there were both external and internally facing aspects of the organization’s leadership activities, and she wanted to be advancing The Food Bank in the community. That was our delineation, the CEO position advancing The Food Bank externally and the function of the COO managing internal operations. Of course, the CEO always has the prerogative to get involved in operations. I was pleased that this had been thought through.

Any concerns at that point?

D’Amato: I have to interject here ... Carol asked the question that distinguished her from all the other candidates. She asked, “Are you going to let me do my job?” It’s a very valid question, and her having the courage to ask really differentiated her.

Tienken: Catherine was pretty straightforward in answering me, too. She acknowledged that it was going to be a growth experience for her to let go.

D'Amato: And six years later I'm further out of it – but I still have my list!

And, Catherine – what concerns did you have as CEO?

D'Amato: When you're growing an organization a lot of the operations work is fun, and of course I was concerned about having someone else take over. I also needed to make certain that someone who had not worked in the nonprofit world before understood completely that in nonprofits no matter what title you have you are always a working manager. At The Food Bank you're also expected to pitch in and work in other functional areas. We all do the inventory, for example. Many of us interview clients. This didn't appeal to every candidate we interviewed. Some simply told us that they didn't think there was a fit. And I respected that.

Tienken: But it was energizing and exciting for me! I wanted to be taught, but I wanted it to be clear that I didn't want or need someone else to be doing my job. So my first request on coming on board – before I knew about The Food Bank's orientation program -- was to have a month of complete immersion in the organization.

How did you immerse yourself?

Tienken: I knew that I had to get pretty deep into the organization during the first month, before getting caught up in any specific tasks. I wanted to learn and to get to know the staff. I rode on the delivery trucks, worked in the warehouse, reviewed all procedures, etc. I did pretty much everything that people on the operations side do.

And how did the rest of the team deal with this?

D'Amato: They were ready to have Carol join us, and I think they understood the benefit of her being so hands-on with them. However, there was understandable concern about how her coming on board would affect their access to me as CEO. There was going to be a new reporting structure; how could people get to me? Could they still just drop by? We happened to have some turnover at the same time, so as we were recruiting we were able to set expectations appropriately.

Tienken: Everyone still wanted access to Catherine! There were some tough conversations between us about it. But when you're evolving and becoming more professional, this is some of what occurs. Actually, I think people were expecting me to come in and upset the apple cart right away. Instead I did a lot of watching and participating. That really helped build trust.

Carol, looking back, what happened that really supported you in getting acclimated?

Tienken: In one way it was serendipitous, and in another intentional ... one of my first major tasks was to evaluate our IT system. It was proprietary, custom-built for The Food Bank, and the company that built it was going out of business. Nobody liked or really understood the system, so I went to Catherine with the business case for a new system. This time I proposed that we buy an off-the-shelf system that was being used by other food banks. Systems conversions are obviously labor-intensive and wouldn't work for everyone. But, the process has allowed us to find ways to connect to external food bank colleagues, something that we couldn't do before. And since we were deeply involved in the conversion, we know it intimately and can teach it to new employees.

For me, it was also an opportunity to engage with the team. I established myself as a leader, while showing that I understood the challenges people faced in doing their jobs. Through the process I had the opportunity to institute a collaborative working relationship with the staff – something I wanted very much. We got to know each other and we got something important done.

Now a new facility is being built and we are using the same technique: engaging the team. There are good models for doing this from the for-profit sector.

D'Amato: We are more dependent on individual creativity because our resources are more constrained. On the for-profit side everything is about the business; it's based on facts, data. Here everything is evolutionary, far more collaborative.

Has The Food Bank recruited other bridgers?

D'Amato: We have, and we do. We should clarify: we are a nonprofit, but we think of ourselves as a charitable business. It might be easier for us to assimilate bridgers because we have to run more like a business than some other types of nonprofits do. One example: we would run into situations where we didn't need the types of food that we were being offered – but how do you say no? We created a Food Acquisition Group to do real business development. We took the time to explain our constituents' needs to potential food donors, and ultimately we got better donations. Now we are better understood in the community – and therefore receive more nutrition-rich donations from the food industry.

Tienken: We have business people on staff, and they bring their talents... but they do have to learn. For example, they have to learn how to work with a board. In the past they were paid to be experts. Our world is about listening, positioning, advancement. There are different reporting lines, committees to work with...

D'Amato: ... it's a different structure, and perhaps not always so clear-cut.

What is the best advice you can give an organization assimilating a bridger in a leadership role?

Tienken: From my perspective, the best thing The Food Bank, and Catherine especially, did was to allow me to immerse myself. To ask questions, to watch – to be given permission not to change everything right away, or all at once.

D'Amato: We've recently gone through a review of our talent and growth needs, and the staff has requested that we publish an explanation of our roles. Not just an org chart, but a description of how we are all expected to interact. I think that would be useful to an organization bringing in a new C-level person, whether or not they are a bridger.

I would also say that if nonprofits have talented leaders, those people should be capable of, and encouraged to, bring in other leaders. So I would make it clear from the beginning that the organization expects to use all the skills and creativity that its bridgers might have.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.