

Nonprofit COOs: Where to Turn for Support

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of the nonprofit chief operating officer's (COO) job is its variety. The way a COO's responsibilities are defined can differ significantly depending on the organization's strategic imperatives, design, history, and culture, as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of the executive director (ED) and other leaders.

Given the complex and varied role a COO fills, it can be challenging to find the right support on the job. In fact, in our many conversations with COOs, deputy directors, and other people in similar roles, we have heard that many nonprofit COOs have no real peers in their organizations.

So where do these COOs turn for support? Among the ones we spoke with, seeking out and leveraging multiple resources has proven fruitful, even though many noted that more sources of support would be welcome. Despite their desire for more resources, however, COOs have been successful in finding advice by leveraging networks, internal resources, professional associations, research and articles, and more.

Making connections

Put simply, one great way to get started in finding support is to make networking an ongoing part of the COO role. "I think this is important for any professional who wants to be constantly improving in their job—a lifelong learning approach," said Sue D. Sullivan, chief strategic officer of Citi Performing Arts Center, a nonprofit performing arts institution based in Boston. "I've always enjoyed networking and mentoring. I try to be committed to being a mentor and/or a resource to other nonprofit administrators— young and old—whenever possible."

However, many COOs said the most valuable connections—those with senior executives who have experienced the specific situations the COO is currently facing—are often the most difficult connections to make.

"I am three months new to the position and this is a major issue for me already," said Aaron W. Chavis, COO of LifeTies Inc., a Trenton, NJ-based nonprofit that serves youth in crisis. "My CEO [chief executive officer] is very supportive, but as we look to grow the organization, I could use mentorship from people serving in the COO capacity who have taken local agencies to a statewide or national level."

Similarly, COO Steve Gibson of the National Institute for Trial Advocacy in Louisville, CO, the nation's largest provider of advocacy skills training for lawyers, said he began seeking COO peers to talk to about

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the issues that arose as his organization underwent some major changes, including moving its headquarters and hiring an entirely new staff (which included him). “I wanted to hear how others are addressing the dual and related issues of organizational change and the culture challenges of a ‘business-like’ nonprofit,” he said. Gibson said he found some of the answers he sought by talking the issues over with a friend in a similar job, by networking at relevant professional/trade organizations, and by posting questions on COO listserves.

Finding support on the “inside”

An obvious place for COOs to look first for support is within their organizations. Internal resources can include the founder, the chief executive officer (CEO), the ED, other members of the senior management team, and the board of directors.

“I’m fortunate to have available to me one of the founders of the organization who served as its CEO for a number of years,” said one COO. “He’s still on the staff but is terrific about not getting involved in the management of the organization unless he’s asked. I use him as a sounding board regularly.”

For larger nonprofits the best internal resource for a COO is oftentimes the core of senior managers who oversee specific functions, such as human resources (HR), finance, quality assurance, etc. “Generally, it’s in the best interests of these senior managers to have a successful COO in place and they should be willing to act as sounding boards for the COO,” said Michael Milczarek, treasurer/chief financial officer of The May Institute, a Randolph, MA-based nonprofit that provides educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral healthcare services for individuals with autism and other special needs. (While Milczarek’s title is financial, his role encompasses many of the responsibilities of a COO.)

Interestingly, several COOs said that they have found that an organization’s CEO is often not the best internal source for advice and support for a COO. Milczarek said CEOs and COOs have different priorities at many nonprofits. “Usually, the CEO is externally focused on board, constituency, and development issues and is looking to the COO to handle the internal management of the organization,” he said. Milczarek noted that an exception might be cases where the CEO had at one time been the COO within the organization or had that role in a previous job and had a strong appreciation for, and insight into, the role of the COO.

Angela Wenger, executive vice president and COO for the New Jersey Academy for Aquatic Sciences, a Camden, NJ-based nonprofit that specializes in marine conservation and education, said that she and her organization’s president are a balanced leadership team because the focus of their jobs is different. “My

president has pointed out that my attention to people building and succession management is a great strength, and it is probably what he appreciates most about me.”

Even though some COOs noted that building mentoring relationships with board members can be challenging (depending on an organization’s management and reporting structure), it can be rewarding, and the board can be an excellent source of advice and support as particular issues arise. “We have a good board with experienced people, and that’s incredibly helpful,” said Dale Galvin, COO at Rare, an Arlington, VA-based conservation organization.

Emily Brower, COO of Urban Medical Group, a Jamaica Plain, MA-based nonprofit primary care practice, said that her board proved invaluable during a two-year period when the organization was without an ED. “I used the board for some tricky management issues and moral support, and they were extremely helpful,” she recalled.

The type of mentor a COO needs can even change over time, said Wenger. Early in a career a COO can benefit from having a mentor inside the organization who can provide information about specific tasks and procedures, as well as offer insight about the organization’s culture and traditions. Later on Wenger noted that it can be useful to have a mentor from an outside organization who has faced similar on-the-job challenges, and who can offer knowledge and help the COO connect with other external resources.

Hiring a coach

A number of COOs said they have found career coaching to be a useful tool. Sullivan said that a board member at her previous nonprofit employer lined up a volunteer coach to provide career development for the senior management team. Sullivan, who had been with the organization for 10 years, was the self-described “guinea pig” who met first with the coach. As part of the coaching process, the coach interviewed Sullivan, as well as some of her direct reports and other members of the senior management team. “It was really helpful to see, in an objective way, how staff at all levels really viewed me and my role,” Sullivan said. “You sort of lose your perspective over time. It helped me focus and look at my long-term goals.”

At Citi Performing Arts Center Sullivan has recruited career coaching professionals to sit on the organization’s HR advisory committee, which proved helpful in the roll-out of the organization’s new performance evaluation system. “It was a successful roll-out and I think the coaching was a part of that,” Sullivan said. “It was incredibly helpful.”

Another COO got permission from her organization's board to hire a coach following a difficult leadership change at the organization. At the time the COO said the work environment was so stressful that she suspected the focus of her coaching sessions would be on transitioning out of the organization. Instead the sessions helped her realize that she really wanted to stay with the organization. "What helped most was talking things out with someone who was completely outside the organization, who didn't know the people, the situation, or the history," the COO said. "I just needed to talk about today and going forward."

In addition to being an objective sounding board, the COO said the career coach helped her develop a strategy for managing her way through the crisis. One simple change they came up with was that when things in the office started to bother her, the COO would physically leave the building and take a walk around the block. "It really helped," she said.

Leveraging formal peer networks

Finding formal networks can be challenging for COOs, as their roles vary so much across organizations. But there are a few role-specific networks for COOs, including Bridgestar's Boston COO Group and its national COO Listserve. The COO Group comprises Boston-area COOs who meet monthly at the Bridgespan Group's Boston office. The COO Listserve is a moderated, electronic, discussion tool. (For more information about these groups or to learn how to join them, please see related article: Networking Resources for COOs.)

Ryan McReynolds, regional director of campus operations at Campus Crusade for Christ-Northeast Region, said the Boston COO Group provides a good way for him to share information and learn about new management tools that could benefit his Boston-based organization. For example, one of the COO group's meetings introduced the members to RAPIDSM, a decision-making tool developed by Bain & Company, Inc., and adapted for the nonprofit sector by the Bridgespan Group. "The RAPID model has been particularly helpful," McReynolds said. "I have used it multiple times to make better decisions. It takes into account the unique leadership culture of nonprofits and that has been well worth my time at the COO meetings."

Brower is a member of both the Boston COO Group and the COO Listserve. She said listserves and other electronic networks are very helpful for pragmatic questions, such as "Do you know a good IT vendor?" She said the advantage of in-person networking groups is members' ability to share insights not only about vendors and similar topics, but also about the interpersonal issues that crop up as part of every COO's job.

“There’s no substitute for meeting in person,” Brower said. “Everyone has their challenges around working with highly skilled, entrepreneurial folks and being able to talk openly [with other COOs] about their strategies is super helpful.”

Gibson said that being part of an in-person networking group made it easier for him to find peers who are also a good match with his personality. “You can develop that next level of trust, where you can have some degree of reliance upon someone for their opinion, advice, or just plain support,” he said.

Other COOs agreed. “I have the good fortune of having a close network of other COOs (and COO-type folks) here in the DC area,” said Chris Busky, CAE, who is COO of Heart Rhythm Society, a Washington, DC-based education and advocacy group for cardiac arrhythmia professionals and patients. “One of the best resources for me is our COO lunch group. Six of us meet monthly for lunch to share war stories and learn from each other.”

Many of the COOs we talked to said other good peer resources include women’s professional groups and associations, chambers of commerce, nonprofit umbrella groups, and local listserves and roundtables.

Theresa Crawford, director of finance and administration of Communities In Schools of Atlanta, an organization that connects community resources with schools to help students be successful, said, “We have the Georgia Center for Nonprofits that provides a great network for nonprofits. They offer various courses, workshops, and seminars that allow opportunities to meet and develop relationships with your peers.”

“I have found the best resource to be professional trade groups to which my organization belongs,” Milczarek said. “These groups generally offer both formal and informal opportunities to network and often have working committees that function on a number of specific issues. Whether this works for other COOs, of course, depends on the nature of the COO’s organization and the state of the ‘industry’ in which it functions.”

Maintaining informal networks

In addition to conducting formal networking via associations and other groups, many COOs said they have found it helpful to maintain informal networks of former co-workers, friends, and peers at similar organizations.

“The best thing I have is a group of four women I get together with every month or two for dinner,” said one COO. “We worked together on a project at one time, and it was one of those ‘high-performing team’ experiences none of us wanted to end. Because we are all at different organizations, we started getting together for dinner, and it’s been an incredible gift. Different ages, different backgrounds and perspectives, but all in healthcare. We really get into the issues when we meet.”

Many of the COOs said their informal networks are made up of people who work in their specific realm of the nonprofit sector. Chavis said he gains fresh insight by brainstorming with peers in other social service organizations. Galvin created an informal network of senior staff who work in the conservation field. And Wenger said her bank of peer mentors and coaches includes current and former executives from the museum field.

“Especially when I was relatively new to the role, I found myself relying on a loose (and informal) network to navigate the currents of being a COO,” said Ken Bubp, COO of Conner Prairie Museum, a Fishers, IN-based outdoor history museum. “For me that has meant using the web to seek out others in similar situations who are geographically distant in addition to finding people nearby. I’ve found that even a modest time investment on my part in those informal networks has really paid dividends.”

A wide variety of resources

“I find a wide range of resources is important, since my role is so general,” Sullivan said. In addition to reading articles and research papers, Sullivan is a member of the Boston COO Group and the COO Listserve. She established a professional advisory group for her organization’s HR function, plus an HR task force comprising a diverse collection of staff members. (The employee task force resulted in the creation of an employee awards program, as well as social events, a speaker series, and several community outreach efforts.) Sullivan is also considering reaching out to alumni groups and/or local colleges to consult on new HR handbooks and other projects. “I’ll use any resource I can find,” Sullivan added.

It’s clear that the resources nonprofit COOs tap to gain advice vary widely, as do the responsibilities inherent in the role. Whether COOs find advice through articles, lectures, peer mentors, or even board members, what’s clear is that the key to finding support in the COO role is recognizing the variety of resources available and choosing those most relevant to the specific challenges and advice the COO seeks.

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.