



What's Next for Nonprofits?

An interview with Nancie Zane and Linshuang Lu of Praxis Consulting Group

Nancie Zane, Linshuang Lu and their colleagues at Philadelphia-based Praxis Consulting Group work with numerous nonprofit organizations on leadership development, strategic planning and culture change.

Lu and Zane were on a team assembled by the Center for Creative Leadership and American Express to conduct research on nonprofit leadership, with a focus on the needs of emerging leaders. Their findings and recommendations are available in the report, [Emerging Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: Myths, Meaning and Motivations](#). The two consultants recently spoke with *Leading Effectively* about the research and its implications for leadership in the nonprofit sector.

The report focuses on emerging leaders with an eye toward helping nonprofit organizations evolve, as a new cadre of people work and lead in the sector. What sets this research apart from what else is out there?

Zane: There's a lot of information about talent management as it relates to high-potentials, i.e. those individuals who fit a very particular profile and are assumed to "have it" (vs. those that "just don't get it"). This research on emerging leaders is less focused on examining the traits of the individual leader and places more emphasis on how to create a culture of leadership and learning in which the goal is to engage "emerging leaders" at all levels and tap their full potential in service of the organizational mission.

I think what is exciting about the framework that informs the research at CCL — which echoes our beliefs at Praxis as well — is the notion that everyone has leadership potential and that the many leadership behaviors that will best serve an organization can be taught and practiced and will result in increased capacity. With a culture of learning and an assumption of a "systems" approach to leadership development, you can leverage all the talent in an organization while still differentiating among individuals based on how they interact/perform/take up their leadership.

Lu: I'd add that a lot of the research that is out there on emerging leaders comes from survey methods and quantitative analysis. By combining focus groups and appreciative inquiry methods with CCL's World Leadership Survey results, we were able to bring out people's voices a bit more. We could hear from them directly about what they hope for as emerging nonprofit leaders and what draws them to the sector.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert.



Nancie Zane



Linshuang Lu

Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the January, 2012 issue were Nancie Zane and Linshuang Lu of Praxis Consulting.

What stands out most for you in the findings?

Zane: The millennial generation is very articulate about the importance of learning, having opportunities to be challenged and getting feedback. One of the comments we heard in the focus groups that really struck us was, "If I'm not learning, I lose my motivation. If I'm not learning, I'm more likely to leave."

Another key point is that emerging leaders have an assumption of transparency, that leaders will frame the bigger picture. They want to know, "How does my job fit in? How can I make sure I am making a difference?" All generations want to make a difference, but the younger generation wants more evidence. How do we know we are having an impact, how do we measure it? It's not enough to say, "We do excellent work." And as one emerging leader said, "I want to be married to the cause, not an organization."

Lu: It's often said that millennials have high expectations and that's sometimes perceived as a negative trait. In our research, we did hear this theme of high expectations, but it was most certainly positive. We heard that millennials want opportunity, learning and development. They want to have impact on the mission. This is really all about the need to be engaged in the work, which represents an enormous opportunity for the sector to tap their talent and energy.

A couple other things that stand out from the research are having the freedom to make mistakes and work/life balance. Emerging leaders want a culture that supports trying new things and is flexible regarding when, where and how they do their work.

What's getting in the way of creating environments that promote learning and meet needs across generations?

Lu: Part of it is that people in leadership — who are very good at what they're doing - have a hard time letting go of some of their responsibility. It's a tough thing to share or re-think the role you've played. Another piece of that is not having enough resources — both time and money — to really support development and learning.

Zane: I agree. There's a lot of expectation of people to do more with less. So, the time to reflect, teach and learn, either as an organization or an individual, gets left out — as if that's a luxury. What's getting in the way, then, is not appreciating the importance of learning as a critical step in high performance. Executive directors, board members, funders need to see growth and learning as an essential function.

Another factor is that, given the economy, the baby boomers haven't left the workforce and aren't going to leave soon. They feel more hesitant to train others. People are a little stuck in this mindset, so we need to be much more innovative about how we think about learning, development and leadership.

How do you help people get unstuck?

Zane: One thing to get people unstuck is to have intergeneration conversations about what matters. We just held a cross-organization, cross-generational conversation with a number of organizations in the nonprofit community here in Philly. Sponsored by Citi Foundation, the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, La Salle Nonprofit Center and Wharton Leadership Program, we asked groups to include their executive director and an emerging leader from another generation. Just having the dialogue cross-generationally opened up some new possibilities.

The millennials were saying, *there are things we can teach you and we believe we have a lot to learn, too*. The boomers were able to say, *we've been neglecting leadership development and we didn't realize you actually have some resentment toward us around our not leaving — and it's economic, we can't leave*. And Gen X is feeling in the middle; they're getting a lot of demands from both ends. But, once people were able to name the challenges and talk about them, people saw they had a lot of common ground

Lu: I would add that it's important to recognize that challenges in the organization are, in part, cultural. Executive directors can't improve the situation with a quick-fix program. There needs to be a transformation process at the individual and organization level.

Zane: Right. How do you build on those conversations? How do you create a learning environment? Are you able to reflect on how you do your work and how you could do it better?

The report includes a series of recommendations for each of the findings. How would you suggest getting started?

Zane: I think you have to look at multiple levels: interpersonal, groups and systems. The interpersonal may be as simple as bringing people together to talk about how they see their work in this next year. What they are excited about, how they hope to make a difference, things that connect people around the work. And you need to be attuned to hearing what different people are saying.

Another thing is to assess what the organization offers to help people grow. You could reflect on this at a staff meeting or board meeting: What have we done in the last six months that really worked well? What should we do more of? Also, consider how you demonstrate learning and development through your own work. Do you ask for help from people who can mentor you? Who are you mentoring and for what purposes?

Lu: Also, is there something that you normally take responsibility for that you could delegate to someone else? Or if there's a big challenge that you've been facing as a leader, can you delegate a piece to a group of people or bring in others to help?

You can also do small things. Invite someone else to join you in a meeting with a funder or attend a board meeting. Give them a role in that meeting. When we are talking about culture change, often small things matter quite a bit.

What else? What's the big message here?

Zane: Leadership development is one form of capacity-building. If you haven't paid attention to the skills and resources needed to do the work, not only in the present but what will be needed in the future, you'll be at a loss. The intergenerational lens is one more way to tap the richness in our workforce and build social capital. It's one more way to understand what's important and what people need to be as productive as possible in service of the work.

Emerging Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: Myths, Meaning and Motivations is a report based on responses from 3,874 leaders in the U.S., that CCL surveyed from 2008 to 2011 through its World Leadership Survey. It also draws on small group interviews involving more than 50 nonprofit leaders and graduate students with experience in the sector. The report grew out of an ongoing partnership between American Express and CCL and was developed by a team of experts at CCL, Northwestern University, the University of Michigan and Praxis Consulting Group.