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Upfront

The Toughest Job You'll Never Get: Would-be EDs cite inadequate mentoring, low pay, and poor lifestyle as career obstacles

By Alana Conner

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

The Toughest Job You'll Never Get

Would-be EDs cite inadequate mentoring, low pay, and poor lifestyle as career obstacles

Jacinda Abcarian, executive director of Oakland, Calif.-based Youth Radio, knows her organization from way back when. In the early 1990s, she was among the first high school students to undergo Youth Radio's training program, which teaches media production skills and offers counseling services while supplying award-winning broadcasts to outlets such as National Public Radio. She then worked her way up through the organization's ranks, from peer teacher, to reporter, to producer, to associate director, to managing director, and finally to executive director.

"Little Jacinda the student is now the ED," she laughs.

Although Abcarian's devotion to her organization is common in the nonprofit sector, her organization's commitment to her may not be, suggest findings from a recent national study conducted by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Meyer Foundation, and Idealist.org. The researchers surveyed 5,754 respondents from nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies, 82 percent of whom had previously worked in nonprofits.

Their findings, presented in a report titled *Ready to Lead? Next Generation Leaders Speak Out*, shows that although some 32 percent of the survey's respondents aspire to become nonprofit executive directors, only 4 percent are receiving explicit training for that position. And despite the fact that three times more women than men participated in the study, nearly

twice as many men reported that they are getting the future ED treatment.

"There is still some gender discrimination," says Marla Cornelius, a projects director at CompassPoint and one of the report's authors. "It's dismaying. We're in the social change sector. This is not what you'd hope to find."

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Meanwhile, corporations are doing a far better job of growing their own leaders, found CompassPoint and Meyer Foundation's *Daring to Lead 2006* study. Whereas 60 percent to 65 percent of for-profit senior management positions are filled from within, fewer than a third of nonprofit executives are hired internally. This fact is not lost on the survey's respondents: 55 percent say that they would need to leave their organizations to advance their careers.

The study's respondents also know that nonprofit executive directors face formidable challenges. Forty percent of them say that a notoriously poor work-life balance might keep them from pursuing executive directorships. And 64 percent worry that committing to a career in the nonprofit sector

will compromise their financial health—including their ability to retire comfortably and to pay off debt.

As Abcarian's story suggests, however, some nonprofits are smoothing the climb up their organizational ladders. To cultivate her as Youth Radio's executive director, Abcarian says, the board looped her into its activities early on, consultants helped the organization develop a three-year strategic plan that included her transition, and volunteers continue to contribute their expertise in management and finance. Youth Radio has also always paid her well, she notes: "Whenever I took on new responsibilities, I was recognized with a new title or raise."

Because Youth Radio has a collaborative leadership model, Abcarian avoids some of the isolation, long hours, and weighty responsibility that many executive directors face. The organization's founder and former de facto executive director, Ellin O'Leary, didn't leave when Abcarian took the wheel. Instead, she transitioned into a new role—president—and focuses on the journalism side of the organization, whereas Abcarian focuses on the youth services side. Both report to the board.

Offering employees reasonable salaries, good benefits, and a decent work-life balance are all the more important as nonprofits compete with socially responsible businesses for talent, says Cornelius: "Our respondents are saying, 'I want to do this work, but it's going to look different.'"

—Alana Conner