

# The Brainerd Foundation Leadership Initiative

## ***A White Paper on Building Executive Leadership Capacity***

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### **Introduction**

*Hard-to-fill top level jobs, burnout, no one “stepping up”, Executive Directors saying “never again!”* Anecdotal and physical evidence has been pointing to a growing challenge in finding and retaining qualified and inspired executive and senior level leaders in the Northwest conservation community.

In the fall of 2008, the Brainerd Foundation commissioned this white paper to better understand their observations of challenges to executive level leadership in grantee organizations. Further, they wanted to identify ways the Foundation might be able to help in strengthening and stabilizing their grantees and the conservation community overall by investing in leadership capacity.

During this scan of the field, conversations were held with grantees, fellow funders, capacity builders and numerous national “thought leaders” who have studied the leadership gap in recent years and helped illuminate the complex nature of the problems that have given rise to the current situation.

While the original focus of this study was to explore executive and senior level leadership within organizations, it became apparent that there were notable differences between those two levels and that it is the leap from junior, mid and senior level leadership to executive level leadership that holds the most significant challenges for the Foundation’s constituency.

Three main themes emerged from this study:

- A. The lack of attractiveness and “do-ability” of the Executive job itself
- B. An overall organizational structure and culture that fails to support or encourage leadership
- C. An absence of bench strength and nonprofits’ ability to attract and prepare new leaders - younger, older and multi-cultural.

Even for those considering these issues full-time, developing solutions is still very much a work in progress. However, there are clear opportunities for technical and adaptive changes that may lead towards more robust and stable leadership for the conservation community.

This report is organized as follows:

- I. Findings from the field
- II. A menu of opportunities for intervention...and potential roles for the Foundation
- III. Select resources
- IV. Key informants.

## I. Findings from the Field.

Observations of Pacific Northwest conservation nonprofits mirror those in the nonprofit sector overall. As much as we might think our situation unique (and the nuances certainly are), the challenges for executive and senior level leadership in the region are very similar to those faced by groups working on other issues in other parts of the country.

### **A. The lack of attractiveness and “do-ability” of the Executive job**

Let’s start on the upside. Elements of the position that attracted Executive Director candidates also are likely to retain those same individuals. Key attributes of the job that Executive Directors find most compelling are control of their environment, and the power and authority to get important work done and make meaningful, positive change.

Executive Directors were quick to point out that there were elements of their job, organization or working environment that played a critical role in their ability *and desire* to sustain themselves in their current position - or to take on a new position in another nonprofit as Executive Director:

- A hot issue
- An organization with a great reputation
- A generous benefits package, including comprehensive health insurance, a flexible work schedule, and a sabbatical program
- A Deputy/Administrative Director on staff. This person handles the day-to-day finances, administration and, frequently, personnel management, and provides a platform upon which the Executive Director can do their best work
- A great Board - one that understands and embraces its roles and responsibilities - and is appropriately supportive and directive
- A mentor
- Peer networking.

Moreover, Executive Directors cited these opportunities as helping them stay “fresh” in their work:

- Staying within the conservation community, but switching jobs every few years
- Making progress on conservation issues
- Support for and availability of quality training opportunities
- Taking a sabbatical.

Significant challenges and barriers to Executive Director success and longevity exist as well. The following were noted as obstacles that deter candidates or cause premature departures of Executive Directors:

1. **Fundraising and cash flow.** The constant pressure and responsibility to build and maintain operating funds was cited as a major deterrent to taking on the Executive Director job as well as a main cause of burnout. Funder-created bureaucracies, with onerous hoops or reporting requirements, add to this burden.

2. **Sheer quantity and range of work and responsibilities.** Executive Directors are expected to do everything well, including “walking on water”. Boards and staff demand excellence in both internal management controls and external relations, and in both big picture visioning and detail orientation. The volume of work is overwhelming, too. People have left or turned down such positions in order to “have a life”.

Where Executive Directors are held back by a lack of particular experience, a skills training may be helpful. And, Executive Directors in our region reported that they had access to training as well as support from funders to underwrite that training. But, the ability to take additional time away from family/home life constrains the accessibility of those trainings.

3. **Compensation.** Money was not described as a motivator, but lack of it certainly could be a de-motivator. Emerging and existing leaders described a need to have a salary that can reasonably support a regular life - family, house, etc. A number of respondents noted that they could only “afford” this work because of a spouse who was able to be the primary earner or because they didn’t have children to support. Moreover, retirement benefits and decent health coverage became increasingly important to employees as they matured; lack of these benefits could spur staff to seek employment elsewhere.

Further, compensation has not kept pace with the professionalization of the sector. Many Executive Directors are expected to be highly skilled in finance, fundraising, communications, policy, strategy, management, and leadership. Compensation, in general, does not go far enough to reflect this extraordinarily wide skill set.

Additionally, national conservation nonprofits pay higher salaries (and in some cases substantially higher) with more comprehensive benefits packages than local or regional nonprofits and are likely to be more competitive for the best talent. This has provided some serious competition in Alaska, where national environmental groups have a strong presence. Government positions may not offer substantially higher pay, but benefits packages are comprehensive and job security is typically high.

4. **Personnel and personality issues.** More frequently cited than dealing with poor performance by staff, Executive Directors were experiencing fatigue with handling tricky or prickly staff and board members.<sup>1</sup>
5. **Isolation.** Northwest area conservation Executive Directors experienced both physical isolation (in terms of location) and positional isolation. Issue focus can be so narrow that colleagues are hard to find. And, due to competitive funding, directors are often reluctant to share their concerns, fears and weaknesses with their colleagues or funders.

Rural groups are additionally challenged by the difficulty of attracting new talent from out of the area. They may feel they have already tapped the existing human

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<sup>1</sup> Fundraising and personnel/personality management issues were described as the two main areas that kept Executive Directors “up at night”.

resources of their community, but are unsure how to make rural living appealing to outsiders - especially when they offer “nothing special” in the way of compensation and a lifestyle that proves a draw to a limited few.

**B. An overall organizational structure and culture that fails to support or encourage leadership**

- 1. Leadership needs to look more attractive.** Our respondents have observed that there are plenty of people with talent but fewer with the desire to step into leadership roles. Staff enjoy the political/programmatic work, but don't want the hassle of organizational leadership or management. They may rise to a senior position or be part of a management team, but resist going further as the added administrative and fundraising burden will take them away from their true passion and strength (policy, program, organizing, etc.). Executive Directors have not communicated why they love their jobs and, as a result, it is largely the headaches, stresses and overwhelming expectations that are conveyed to more junior staff.
- 2. Management skills need to be developed across organizations.** Staff that are promoted over time to program or policy director-type positions may not have built the skills needed to successfully supervise and inspire their direct reports, nor are they necessarily willing to take the time needed to effectively resolve sticky situations before they explode. Leadership trainings that focus on self-awareness, communication style and building teams are helpful, but don't adequately address the full range of management tools for resolving conflict, delegating work productively, and handling thorny personnel (and personality) issues.

Executive level management trainings are available at the Stanford Center for Social Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School and, more locally, at the Cascade Center at the University of Washington, but offerings for junior and mid-level nonprofit managers are sparse.

- 3. Succession planning is largely not happening** until a critical juncture such as an announced leadership transition. Area conservation nonprofits may have a short term (“hit by a bus”) plan for leadership triage and transition on file, but there are few plans for building leadership capacity and redundancy on staff and Board over the longer term.
- 4. The way we “work our issues” may need to be redefined.** Our existing assumptions about the pace of progress may not hold the attention of emerging leaders. A long cycle of reward-for-efforts, measured in decades, doesn't attract “results-oriented adrenaline junkies” who are drawn to the rapid returns of campaigns or start-ups.

Additionally, the silo-ing of environmental issues can be isolating. An executive with a natural resources specialty may not be interested in working for an organization with a sole focus on endangered species or toxics. Even the environment as a whole package may be too narrow, as we look at the links to social justice and community development.

Importantly, our conservation work can seem a long hard slog. And, the last eight years of the Bush Administration have made conservation work necessarily reactive

rather than proactive, as we have fought rollbacks of cornerstone environmental policy. Moreover, because of this defensive posture, organizations have been inclined to use extra dollars to expand programs, rather than invest in staff.

5. And finally, other capacity building interventions will not play out as funders hope unless there is deep and stable leadership within the targeted organization.

***C. An absence of bench strength and nonprofits' ability to attract and prepare new leaders - younger, older and multi-cultural***

It is widely acknowledged that the workforce is shrinking with the retirement of the Baby Boomers (though the full effects of this may be delayed by a few years due to the recession) and with the 65-75% of Executive Directors who say that they intend to leave their position within 5 years, with most not planning to assume another Director post. Nevertheless, there is much reason for optimism.

1. **Young people are interested in nonprofit work.** In spite of reports of apathy and names like "Gen X" or "Gen Y" that signify a lack of direction or identity, research demonstrates that young people are galvanized more than ever around changing the world. Witness the large volume of applications that programs like Green Corps receive; they can only serve a small fraction of the interest. The particularly hopeful outcome of the recent elections demonstrates the potential of these age brackets when they exercise their political power. However (and perhaps fortunately), they are seeing opportunities to do so in the for-profit and the public sector, as well as the nonprofit sector.

This is an especially opportune time to attract young people to nonprofit work; our challenge remains in how to keep them in the nonprofit sector and build their leadership capacity so that they can become the next generation of senior and executive staff.

2. **Boomers and retirees are interested, too!** A lot has been written recently regarding what Baby Boomers will do after retirement - and that a significant number would choose a second career in the nonprofit sector. While Boomers may be putting off retirement in the short term due to the economic crisis and their dwindling retirement portfolios, there remains substantial benefit in developing avenues that will ease the transition for Boomers and encourage them to invest their energy and expertise in nonprofit work. Boomers would bring tremendous professional expertise, management skills, and leadership capacity to our work. But, too often, nonprofits have a hard time understanding how to value those skills and expertise or how to apply them to their own set of programs and challenges.
3. **Organizations are not thinking broadly about growing leaders for "the movement".** Many of the Foundation's grantees are of a size that provides little opportunity for a junior staffer to grow (or rise) within the organization. And, in any case, there is often little chance in these organizations to build the skills needed to take on positions of greater responsibility and leadership. Some nonprofits are reluctant to spend on professional development of staff for fear that their investment in professional skills will "walk" when that newly skilled staff person becomes dissatisfied with the limits of their existing position.

4. **We are doing a poor job of reflecting the diversity of our country** on staff and on our boards. And this is holding us back. Not only does it make it more challenging for us to mobilize multi-cultural constituencies, we are failing to attract significant and growing populations to our work and our leadership. Importantly, we are missing out on the tremendous potential of non-traditional (i.e., word-of-mouth) methods of communication for recruitment and organizing. Because of the common belief that “you have to have some to get some”, the hurdle for “entry” seems frustratingly difficult to attain for nonprofit staff and boards.

### III. Select Resources

#### **A. Collaboratives and Funder Initiatives**

##### American Humanics

###### *The Initiative for Nonprofit Sector Careers*

[http://www.humanics.org/site/c.omL2KiN4LvH/b.2480105/k.1764/Initiative\\_for\\_Nonprofit\\_Sector\\_Careers.htm](http://www.humanics.org/site/c.omL2KiN4LvH/b.2480105/k.1764/Initiative_for_Nonprofit_Sector_Careers.htm)

“A broad-coalition of nonprofits working collectively to ... (a) connect talented, skilled, and diverse young people to nonprofit sector careers, and (b) help nonprofit organizations recruit, retain, and cultivate the diverse leadership they will need in the decades ahead... Currently nearly 70 nonprofit organizations, academic centers, foundations and associations have joined in the effort to address nonprofit workforce issues.”

##### Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO)

###### *Roundtable on Leadership*

Intensive face-to-face conversations by interested member-funders on topics that include support and renewal of executive level leadership.

[www.geofunders.org](http://www.geofunders.org)

<http://www.geofunders.org/leadershipdevelopment.aspx>

##### Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

###### *Flexible Leadership Awards*

The FLA program works with a select Haas, Jr. grantees, emphasizing a strong peer component and team-based approaches to leadership development that reach beyond the executive director.

[http://www.haasjr.org/index.php/visitor/our\\_grantmaking/leadership/fla\\_1](http://www.haasjr.org/index.php/visitor/our_grantmaking/leadership/fla_1)

##### Kellogg Action Lab

A joint effort of the Fieldstone Alliance and Nonprofit Finance Fund, providing intensive capacity building serving to select W.K. Kellogg Foundation grantees.

[www.kelloggactionlab.org](http://www.kelloggactionlab.org)

##### Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

###### *Grassroots Leadership Initiative*

[http://www.mrbf.org/resource.aspx?catId=1#Promoting\\_Grassroots\\_Leadership\\_Development:\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_a\\_Learning\\_Program](http://www.mrbf.org/resource.aspx?catId=1#Promoting_Grassroots_Leadership_Development:_The_Role_of_a_Learning_Program)

##### Russell Family Foundation

###### *Grassroots Leaders Fellowship*

Developing community leaders in Pierce County.

[http://www.trff.org/janes\\_fund.aspx](http://www.trff.org/janes_fund.aspx)

#### **B. Readings and Research**

##### The Bridgespan Group

*The Nonprofit Sector's Leadership Deficit*, Tom Tierney, 2006

<http://www.bridgespan.org/LearningCenter/ResourceDetail.aspx?id=948>

*Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit*, Peter Brinckerhoff

<http://www.missionbased.com/>

##### Building Movement Project

*Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership*

<http://www.buildingmovement.org/news/entry/50>

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### Annie E. Casey Foundation

*Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis*

<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={5A026EAE-421A-4CC2-8BEE-046FFD275B9E}>

### Chronicle of Philanthropy

*Regeneration*

Multiple articles on “Regeneration” of Boomers/retirees.

<http://philanthropy.com/regeneration/>

### CommonGood Careers

*The Voice of Nonprofit Talent in 2008: Improving recruitment and retention by responding to the needs of nonprofit employees and jobseekers.*

<http://www.cgcareers.org/knowledgecenter/articles/>

### The Conference Board

*Boomers Are Ready for Nonprofits, But Are Nonprofits Ready for Them?*

<http://www.civicventures.org/breakthrough/reports/ConfBdreport5-25.pdf>

### Durfee Foundation

*Sabbatical Compendium 2007*

<http://www.durfee.org/programs/sabbatical/pdf/Sabbatical%20Compendium.pdf>

### Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO)

*Grantmakers Framework for Understanding Next Generation Leadership*

*Supporting Next Generation Leadership*

*Investing in Leadership, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2*

[www.geofunders.org](http://www.geofunders.org)

### Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies and the Institute of Policy Studies

*Listening Post Project Roundtable on Nonprofit Recruitment and Retention*

<http://www.jhu.edu/listeningpost/news/pdf/workforroundtablefinal.pdf>

<http://www.jhu.edu/listeningpost/news/pdf/comm08.pdf>

### Eugene and Agnes Meyer Foundation

*Ready to Lead: Next Generation Leaders Speak Out* (with CompassPoint and the Annie E. Casey Foundation)

[http://www.meyerfoundation.org/newsroom/meyer\\_publications/ready\\_to\\_lead](http://www.meyerfoundation.org/newsroom/meyer_publications/ready_to_lead)

*Daring to Lead 2006* (with CompassPoint)

<http://www.meyerfoundation.org/downloads/4DaringtoLead2006d.pdf>

### Philanthropy Capacity-Building Resources Database

Over 400 foundations listed

<http://www.humaninteract.org/reports/pcbdatabse.asp>

### Transition Guides

*Four Case Studies of Founder Transitions*

[www.transitionguides.com](http://www.transitionguides.com)

## **C. Coursework, Degrees, Training and Workshops**

### Antioch University Center for Creative Change (Seattle)

*Graduate Program for Visionary Leaders*

<http://www.antiochseattle.edu/academics/creativechange/index.html>

### Antioch University Center for Continuing Education (Seattle) and Leadership Tomorrow

*Legacy Leadership Institute Environmental Stewardship*

A program that prepares experienced adults for leadership and professional roles with

The Brainerd Foundation *Leadership Initiative*

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environmental nonprofits. Fifteen regional and local environmental organizations have signed on to participate in the Institute and host the graduates as they move into the hands-on practicum phase of the program.

<http://staging.antiochsea.edu/ce/certificates-legacy.html>

### Bainbridge Graduate Institute

*MBA in Sustainable Business and Certificates in Sustainable Business Entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship*

[www.bgiedu.org](http://www.bgiedu.org)

### The Cascade Center at the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington

Multiple two, three and five-day courses in strategic management and leadership.

[www.cascadecourses.org](http://www.cascadecourses.org)

### CompassPoint

*Thriving as an Executive Director: The CompassPoint Leadership Seminar*

Four-day seminar over 3 months for seasoned Executive Directors.

<http://www.compasspoint.org/content/index.php?pid=236>

### Environmental Leadership Program

Addresses the leadership development and training needs of emerging environmental professionals who have 3-10 years work and related post-undergrad experience. ELP offers two-year training fellowships to emerging environmental leadership and project seed money and support.

[www.elpnet.org](http://www.elpnet.org)

### Green Corps

*Field School for Environmental Organizing*

One-year full-time paid training designed for recent college graduates who want to launch a career as an environmental leader, with an emphasis on campaigning, civic engagement and grassroots organizing.

[www.greencorps.org](http://www.greencorps.org)

### Harvard Business School

*Executive Education: High Potential Leadership Program*

A weeklong residential course.

<http://www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/hplp/>

*Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management*

A weeklong residential course.

<http://www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/spnm/>

### Harvard Kennedy School of Government

*Executive Education: Strategic Management for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations (among others)*

A weeklong residential course.

<http://ksgexecprogram.harvard.edu/Programs/ngo/overview.aspx>

### Hollyhock Leadership Institute

*Social Change Institute*

A four-day, residential, skills-building program that provides tools on advancing change at the interpersonal, community and systemic level. The Institute has a strong commitment to developing cooperative strategies between First Nations, social justice groups and the nonprofit movement.

[www.hollyhockleadership.org](http://www.hollyhockleadership.org)

### Institute for Conservation Leadership

*Executive Director Leadership Program*

A weeklong program followed six months later by a three-day program that includes board members.

<http://www.icl.org/programs/ed.php>

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### Leadership Montana

A yearlong program.  
[www.leadershipevents.org](http://www.leadershipevents.org)

### Leadership Tomorrow (Seattle)

A yearlong program, with approximately monthly one or two-day gatherings.  
[www.leadershiptomorrowseattle.org](http://www.leadershiptomorrowseattle.org)

### Nancy Bell Evans Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy, Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington

*Pacific Northwest Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute (NELI)*  
A weeklong residential program for seasoned nonprofit executives.  
<http://cascadecourses.org/CoursePages/neli.html#ProgramOverview>

### Rockwood Leadership Institute

*Art of Leadership*  
A weeklong intensive exploration of personal leadership.  
<http://www.rockwoodleadership.org/artofleadership.html>

*Leading from the Inside Out Fellowship*  
A yearlong fellowship.  
<http://www.rockwoodleadership.org/yearlong.html>

### Stanford Graduate School of Business Center for Social Innovation Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders

A two-week residential program.  
<http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/exed/epnl/>

### Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC)

*STEP - Stepping up to Leadership Program*  
By invitation only.  
[www.trec.org/services/index.asp](http://www.trec.org/services/index.asp)

*Strategic Leadership Development Program*  
An eight month-long program for new and developing leaders.  
<http://www.trec.org/services/leadership-dev-pgrm.asp>

### University of Washington, College of the Environment

A new College using faculty in partnership with other departments and schools (and future home of the *Conservation of Living Systems* degree program).  
<http://coenv.washington.edu>

### Whidbey Institute

*Powers of Leadership: Meeting the Challenges of the New Commons*  
A yearlong program with quarterly retreats.  
[http://www.whidbeyinstitute.org/initiatives\\_lnc.html#lnc](http://www.whidbeyinstitute.org/initiatives_lnc.html#lnc)

*Not for Profit Leadership Workshop: Leading Change*  
A daylong seminar.  
[www.whidbeyinstitute.org](http://www.whidbeyinstitute.org)

### Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

*James P. Shannon Leadership Institute*  
A yearlong program with either monthly two-day sessions or quarterly three-day sessions. "To ensure a cadre of renewed, experienced, and effective leaders who are committed to service in the nonprofit sector."  
[www.wilder.org/shannon.0.html](http://www.wilder.org/shannon.0.html)

#### IV. Key Informants

We thank the following individuals for generously sharing their time and expertise.

Aimee Boulanger, consultant conducting the executive search for EARTHWORKS  
Andre Carouthers, Rockwood Leadership Institute  
Polly Carr, (formerly) Alaska Youth for Environmental Action  
Joan Crooks, Washington Environmental Council  
Kathleen Enright, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO)  
Rick Johnson, Idaho Conservation League  
Denise Joines, The Wilburforce Foundation  
Cindy Kang, Green Corps  
Ben Klasky, Islandwood  
Gina Knudson, Salmon Valley Stewardship  
Frances Kunreuther, Building Movement Project  
Martha Levensaler, State Capacity Building, League of Conservation Voters  
Ron McKinley, Kellogg Action Lab  
Dahnesh Medora, Technical Assistance for Community Support (TACS)  
Paula Morris, The Evelyn and Walter Hass, Jr. Fund  
Dianne Russell, Institute for Conservation Leadership  
Paul Shoemaker, Social Venture Partners  
David Simms, The Bridgespan Group  
Gregg Small, Climate Solutions  
Amy Solomon, Bullitt Foundation  
David Thompson, Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC)  
Steve Thompson, National Parks and Recreation Association  
Kay Treakle, The Harder Foundation  
Randy Virgin, (formerly) Alaska Center for the Environment  
Richard Woo, Russell Family Foundation  
Chris Wood, Trout Unlimited

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