

THE FULCRUM POINT

**LOOK WITHIN
BEFORE
LOOKING
OUTSIDE**

**The Fulcrum Point is a candid opinion
series covering relevant and vital
issues nonprofit issues.**

fulcrumleader.com





Why Nonprofit Should Look Within Before Looking Outside

By Chris Looney

In the nonprofit sector, we talk a lot about sustainability, culture, and mission alignment. Yet one of the simplest ways to strengthen all three is often overlooked: promoting from within. Too often, nonprofits bypass their internal talent pipelines in favor of external hires, especially when filling executive roles. This habit may seem harmless, even strategic, but over time it weakens the connective tissue that binds organizations to their people and their communities.

Internal promotion does more than reward loyalty. It reinforces trust, continuity, and cultural understanding. People who have grown within the organization understand the mission from the inside out. They have seen how programs evolve, how decisions are made, and how culture is lived day-to-day. These employees often have deep relationships with program participants, volunteers, and donors, relationships that no amount of onboarding can replicate. When promoted into leadership, they bring both institutional memory and personal investment, two ingredients that strengthen community credibility.

Hiring within also builds morale. When staff see that advancement is possible, they feel valued and are more likely to stay and invest themselves fully. In contrast, when organizations continually recruit external leaders, it signals that existing staff are not seen as capable or ready. Over time, this erodes motivation and sends promising talent elsewhere. The result is a revolving door of leadership that disrupts continuity, slows progress, and undermines trust.

Of course, there are times when bringing in outside talent is not only appropriate but essential. Organizations facing serious cultural dysfunction, strategic drift, or technical challenges may need a leader who can reset the direction or introduce skills not currently present internally. In those moments, an external hire can be catalytic. But those cases should be the exception, not the rule. Too often, boards and executives default to outside candidates out of habit, bias, or a misplaced belief that fresh eyes automatically equal better leadership.



The irony is that many nonprofits train extraordinary leaders through years of service, then watch them leave because they are not given the chance to lead where they are. By promoting from within, especially into CEO and senior roles, we honor the very principles of empowerment and equity that our sector preaches. We also send a clear message to staff, donors, and communities: leadership is something we grow, not something we import.

Promoting internally requires intentionality. It means investing in leadership development, creating transparent succession plans, and equipping managers to mentor their teams. It means identifying high-potential staff early and giving them stretch opportunities that prepare them for greater responsibility. None of this happens by accident, but when it does happen, organizations thrive.

The nonprofit sector exists to strengthen communities. To do that effectively, we must model the same commitment to development and trust that we ask of others. Promoting within is not just a staffing decision; it is a cultural and strategic choice that deepens roots, builds resilience, and ensures the mission continues through those who know it best.

For more information about Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership, please visit our website at www.fulcrumleader.com or reach out to us directly via email at hello@fulcrumleader.com.