

## Tackling Diversity in a New Way

By Nicole Wallace



NATHAN LINDSTROM, FOR THE CHRONICLE

**CLASS DISMISSED:** Teach for America official Natalie Basham co-leads a group for employees who grew up in modest circumstances. "What it did for me is unleash some of the shame that can come if you're not from a high-income background," she says.

periods.

Natalie Basham, a senior managing director at the charity and co-leader of the low-income group, says knowing that some colleagues share her experience of growing up poor has changed the way she thinks about her background.

"What it did for me is unleash some of the shame that can come if you're not from a high-income background or you're a first-generation college graduate and reframed it as a leadership opportunity," she says.

### Structure Hiring to Limit Bias

A few years ago, the Massachusetts branch of Bottom Line realized that for a charity that helps low-income, first-generation students get into and graduate from college, it had an awful lot of white staff members educated at elite private institutions.

The homogeneity was unintentional, says Justin Strasburger, the group's executive director. With support from their families, people from wealthy backgrounds could afford to take low-paying, entry-level jobs at a nonprofit. At Bottom Line, they worked their way up into the positions that were doing most of the hiring.

When those employees interviewed candidates with similar backgrounds, they felt an unconscious connection, says Mr. Strasburger: "They're like, 'This person reminds me of me. Let's get them on board.'"

To counter this, the group introduced formal hiring practices. One of the biggest changes: Many more people from different levels of the organization are now involved in interviews.

"Our goal is to help our students go far in life," Mr. Strasburger says. "If we're not able to hire our alumni students or those who look like them, we're either failing at our job or being inauthentic to our mission."

### Pay a Living Wage

### Give Voice to Employees

Teach for America offers an array of voluntary, employee-run groups for staff to meet and learn from colleagues who share a common background. There are groups for parents, African-American managers, Latinos, and more.

One group is for employees who come from a low-income background, however each person defines that. Members meet online every other month. They have discussed class and family issues that come up at the holidays and talked with an investment adviser about 403(b) retirement plans.

The education nonprofit tells employees that their life experiences are a valuable asset for the charity. It follows through by asking the groups for input on proposed new policies. For example, the management team asked the low-income group for perspective on potential changes to the pay schedule and on how big a burden it was for employees to cover up-front costs, like travel, that are later reimbursed. Teach for America incorporated some of the group's suggestions, such as giving employees plenty of lead time to adjust personal budgets before changing the pay

DoSomething.org, a youth volunteerism charity headquartered in New York, has an unusually high starting salary: \$43,000 a year. It hopes that such pay will open its entry-level jobs to individuals from all walks of life. "A person can live on that in New York City without help from parents," says Aria Finger, the group's chief executive.

Because 20 to 25 percent of DoSomething's employees start as interns, the organization also has looked at how to diversify that pipeline. While the group has always paid interns, it now aims for a pool of candidates mixed by race, class, and parents' level of education. It also offers a housing stipend based on need.



### BEHIND THE VELVET ROPE: ARE NONPROFITS TOO ELITE?

Amid a populist political wave, some in the nonprofit world worry that many charities have grown disconnected from the people they aim to help. This special report offers analysis, opinion, advice, and stories about groups that are trying to change that.

- Charities Get More Professional but Fear Losing Touch With Those They Serve ✓ PREMIUM
- Foundation Executive Who Grew Up Poor Still Feels Like an Outsider at Times ✓ PREMIUM
- Opinion: Debating Philanthropy's 'Elite' Tendencies in a Populist Time

DoSomething employees' health-insurance premiums are fully covered, and the nonprofit offers to pay up to \$20,000 in undergraduate debt for employees after five years at the organization.

"We want low-income folks to know that it's economically possible to stay at DoSomething for the long-term," says Ms. Finger.

#### Hire for Life Experiences...

The California Community Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of people who are struggling in Los Angeles. When CEO Antonia Hernández is hiring, she wants to know whether candidates have lived or worked in the neighborhoods where the foundation supports programs. Do they speak the language residents speak? Are they comfortable engaging in the community?

Ms. Hernández generally doesn't hire people who have worked at foundations. Instead, she recruits community organizers or veterans of government or local nonprofits.

"It's easier to teach philanthropy than it is to teach someone about community organizing, and all that goes into the life experience," she says.

The foundation has become a training ground for larger philanthropies. In recent years, employees went to the James Irvine Foundation, the California Endowment, and other large foundations.

Ms. Hernández used to be frustrated that staff would leave after her organization invested so much time in their training. Now she sees it as an important role for the fund.

"Community foundations can be the door into philanthropy for people to get the training, get the experience, get the connections," she says.

#### ...Not Credentials

Public Allies works to develop community leaders nationwide, in part by placing young people from low-income neighborhoods in yearlong fellowships at local charities. Some have college degrees; some don't. It's not unusual for an organization to request a college graduate.

When that happens, Public Allies talks with the nonprofit about the skills and experiences it needs. Often, the organization discovers qualified candidates without a degree.

With the exception of groups that run college-readiness programs, "I can't think of when it's been make or break to have a degree," says Ava Hernández, executive director of Public Allies Milwaukee.

She argues that the success of young people in their Public Allies assignments has very little to do with their academic training. Sometimes, she says, those without credentials fare better: "Allies who don't have degrees are more open to learning and connect with their community members in a deeper way because they don't have to unlearn things that they might have learned in a classroom about a community."

### **Make Good Training Affordable**

The Institute for Nonprofit Practice in Needham, Mass., runs a low-cost, yearlong certificate program to train people already working at nonprofits who could help diversify the management ranks. It's designed to maximize the number of people in the field with whom students can make connections. Instructors are nonprofit veterans, and the institute offers lots of guest speakers, networking events, and a mentor program.

Once a year, more than two dozen grant makers gather to hear pitches from program participants about their organizations. There's no money on the line, but the students meet funders who might otherwise be out of reach.

It's all about building confidence, says Yolanda Coentro, the institute's chief executive. "You deserve to be in that room, too," she says. "Just because you didn't come from money doesn't mean it's not the place for you. You need those resources to change the world."

Ms. Coentro learned the hard way that people from modest economic backgrounds are at a disadvantage when it comes to fundraising. She started her nonprofit career as a social worker and slowly moved into leadership roles. She says she didn't have the ready-made networks that allowed more prosperous peers to win access to big donors or make connections to program officers.

"My parents didn't have wealthy people sitting at the dinner table," she says, with a wry chuckle.

To compensate, she spent a lot of time building her network of relationships and getting comfortable asking those contacts for help. Her efforts led to greater success raising money and career advancement. But early in her career, Ms. Coentro says, "I was taking the stairs and other people were on the elevator."

### **Invest in Your Low-Wage Staff**

Many nonprofits can boost the number of people from modest economic backgrounds on their program and leadership staffs by developing the skills of the front-line and administrative workers they already employ, Ms. Coentro says.

"We have folks living in poverty working in the nonprofit sector," she says. "We owe it to ourselves to really invest in folks."

When nonprofit compensation makes the news, it's almost always the high CEO salary at a large charity that causes the stir. Far more scandalous are the low wages paid to support staff and front-line workers, says Rusty Stahl, founder of Fund the People, which seeks to increase foundations' financial support for developing the skills of nonprofit workers.

Nonprofits and foundations, Mr. Stahl says, should be thinking about the people who are paid the least and whether their organizations' business models are built on exploiting their lowest-paid employees.

"That's the real problem," he says. "It's not that a few people are too well paid. It's that too many people are too poorly paid."

*Send an e-mail to Nicole Wallace.*

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