

# Profile of Successful Nonprofit Executives

*Interesting*

by Brian O'Connell  
President, Independent Sector

For years I have watched and participated in the hiring of people who turned out to be altogether wrong for jobs in voluntary organizations. After a series of failures in selection for an advanced traineeship program I had to stop and figure out why. In that program, as in so much hiring for nonprofit staff, people were hired without really being matched against specific expectations. I finally realized that most people do not match up with the unique attributes necessary for success in nonprofit work. It's not that the successful executives are any better people than others, but they are different.

Out of many sad lessons, I've developed a profile that helps me screen persons who are exploring staff possibilities. My current profile of persons most likely to succeed is as follows:

**They're committed to public service.** This is more than a generalization. The persons who succeed face many rocky times. They are underpaid for their ability and they put up with a great deal of conflict. For these reasons and many more, these persons must have a dedication to public service that gets them over the obstacles and tough times.

**They like people and get along well with them.** Liking people is often used as the primary criterion for selection and therefore can be exaggerated, but in carrying responsible positions in voluntary agencies most staff people deal with a wide variety of individuals and must be able to get along with them.

**They can subordinate their personal needs and preferences to the needs and goals of volunteers.** This characteristic eliminates the majority of candidates. Most of us cannot consistently subordinate our needs, aspirations, and satisfactions. But the really successful staff persons

in the voluntary agency must have this capacity; otherwise competition between staff and volunteers develops and chokes off opportunities for maximum involvement of community leaders.

**They are flexible.** In a voluntary agency there are frequent and discouraging changes of schedules and plans. Staff persons may be ready to accomplish a major task before the end of the week only to find that the responsible volunteer has changed the schedule or is unavailable to carry out his or her part of it. The successful staff person must be able to adjust to and concentrate on those tasks which are attainable.

**They have a great deal of patience and tolerance.** Staff persons work with a wide variety of volunteers who are often at their most excitable pitch. The more vibrant and active an agency, the more this will hold true. A staff person must be a stable and patient human being or the emotional aspects of working together for significant goals will get out of hand.

**They are mature.** Psychologists define maturity as the ability to forego short-term satisfactions in favor of long-term goals. This applies to organizations as well as to individuals and particularly to successful staff persons. Most goals are long range and require persistent, dogged pursuit through all kinds of difficulties. The satisfactions are rarely found on a weekly or even monthly basis. It's only as the agency looks back from a longer perspective that the attainments are visible and the satisfactions present.

**They're willing to work hard.** Successful people usually work hard, and this is particularly true in the nonprofit field. There is so very much to be done, the dedication of the volunteers is so high and the number of forces to be dealt with so great that the only way to achieve success is by hard work.

Because most people would not fit the profile for success, it is difficult to find people most likely to succeed. I've found that the simplest way is to locate someone who has already demonstrated a capacity to succeed in this unique milieu. For this reason I repeatedly and doggedly advise search committees and staff directors to look within the nationwide group with which they are affiliated. If that doesn't apply then I advise checking with the directors of major agencies in the area. In other words, do almost anything to find candidates who have already demonstrated a capacity to succeed in this kind of work. Having seen the grief and trouble voluntary organizations suffer as a result of hiring the wrong people, I wish I could be sitting across from you now to make this point so strongly that you would realize how totally I have learned the lesson.

---

## ENVIRONMENT

(Continued from page 136)

---

Tucson, Arizona, will develop and test a statewide environmental education program serving elementary school children and their families with a three-year, \$884,720 grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The purpose of the new environmental curriculum is to encourage thousands of Arizona children and their families to actively participate in protection and conservation of the environment. "The seriousness of the environmental crisis cannot be overstated," said Linda Ruth Herzog, executive director of Growing Connections. "To turn the situation around, individuals need to make a personal commitment to actively change their attitudes and behavior. Our program will educate children and their families about environmental issues and motivate them to take action."

\*Growing Connections, 2123 E. Grant Rd., Tucson, AZ 85419, (602) 325-7909