

Nonprofit Leadership Development Toolkit

Nonprofits and NGOs around the world are more focused than ever on developing and retaining the future leaders who will steward their organizations toward greater impact. While a robust “corporate” leadership development system may seem out of reach due to resources or capacity, a few simple practices can go a long way. In Bridgespan’s work supporting hundreds of organizations’ talent development, we have found that the key to low-cost, effective leadership development is to explicitly define the competencies most important to the organization, and then to work with emerging leaders on tailored development plans that help them build those competencies over time.

This toolkit is designed to help executive teams, in coordination with human resources professionals or other staff support roles, to develop and implement the foundational components of an effective leadership development system. It includes four key steps:

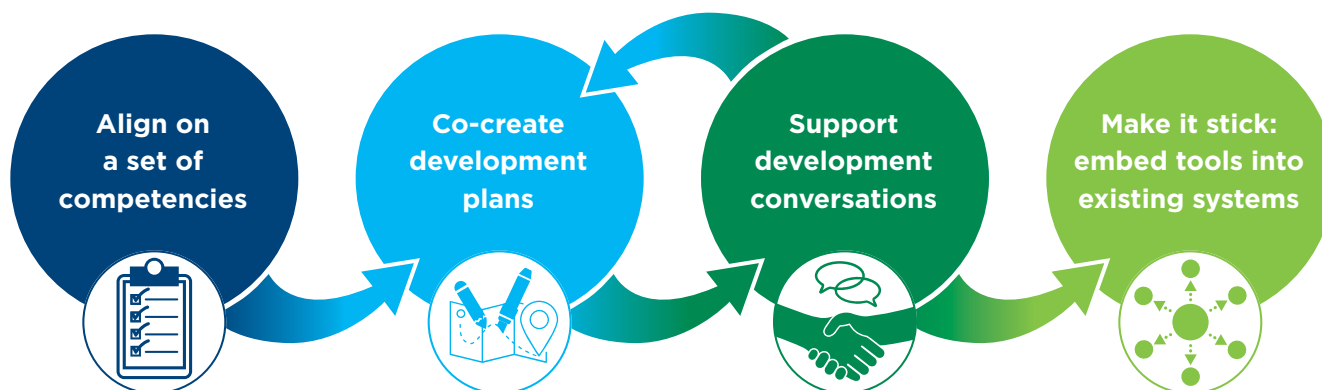
- 1 Align on a set of competencies** that reflect organizational goals and values
- 2 Co-create professional development plans** using the 70-20-10 model
- 3 Support ongoing development conversations** between managers and direct reports
- 4 Make it stick:** Embed these tools into existing talent systems

For each step, we include detailed guidance, practical resources, and worksheets to help executive teams jump-start their leadership development processes.

For additional information, we recommend reading this toolkit’s companion article “[How Nonprofit Leadership Development Sustains Organizations and Their Teams.](#)” It expands on these approaches with real-life examples. Bridgespan also offers a step-by-step, online, team-based program called [Investing in Future Leaders \(IFL\)](#), which helps nonprofit executive teams create inclusive, customized approaches to leadership development. IFL is part of Bridgespan’s [Leadership Accelerator](#), a program to help nonprofit leadership build organizational capacity and tackle key strategy and management challenges.

Whether you choose to implement this toolkit yourself or get support from an external advisor, your team will need to invest a meaningful amount of time. But once you’ve laid the groundwork, it can serve as part of an ongoing system that will prepare your future leaders to pursue your organization’s mission now and over the long term.

Nonprofit Leadership Development: Four Key Steps



Source: The Bridgespan Group

1 Align on a set of competencies that reflect organizational goals and values

What are competencies?

- Competencies explicitly define the skills and capabilities that are required for individuals to do their jobs successfully. Competencies are tied to an organization's mission, strategy, and values.
- Competencies generally fall into two categories: core, skills needed by everyone in the organization, and leadership, skills needed by those in management positions. Core competencies are those that everybody in the organization needs to build to do their work. Leadership competencies enable current and future leaders to take on greater responsibility and perhaps eventually lead their organization.

Why are competencies important?

- By having a clear, agreed-upon set of competencies that align with your organizational goals and values, organizations can make sure they are developing *all* staff effectively on a specific set of necessary skills and capabilities. This is particularly important if you have goals related to equity and inclusion in your organization.

Key resources

- Bridgespan's [competency bank](#)
- ProInspire's [Leading for Race Equity Impact](#) framework
- [Four Mistakes Nonprofits Make When Using Competencies in Talent Management](#)

How to get started

Determine what skills and capabilities are and will be necessary to deliver on your organization's strategy. As you think about what core and leadership competencies are important for your staff to develop, look to your strategy to drive those decisions. Begin the process of selecting your competencies by answering these questions with your leadership team:

- What are the biggest assets of leaders in your organization today? Consider the values, skills, or ways of working that have helped leaders excel in their roles.
- How might leaders in the future need to be different from leaders today or in the past? Consider how your operating context and organizational strategy and goals may have shifted over time.
- What are your organization's values, commitments, or goals related to equity and inclusion? How do your competencies help in furthering those goals and identifying a diverse set of leaders?

Select competencies that will prepare leaders to meet your organization's current and future needs. Select up to 12 core and leadership competencies. Feel free to draw from Bridgespan's [competency bank](#) for inspiration and adapt them as appropriate. While twelve is simply a guideline, we have found it more feasible to focus development efforts on the subset of skills that are most necessary for impact or require the most investment. It's a judgment call, and involving your senior management team can be helpful.

You'll notice the skills in our competency bank have two components: sub-competencies and scaled definitions.

- **Sub-competencies** help you get specific about the components of a competency so the required skills can be clearly defined.

The example on page 5 below shows that the “decision-making” competency is made up of two sub-competencies: gathering and interpreting data and executing decisions.

- **Scaled definitions** describe competencies along a spectrum of progression that give staff a clear vision of how they can grow. Instead of someone “having” or “not having” a specific competency, staff can see what kinds of behaviors demonstrate a competency at early, intermediate, or advanced stages.

Keep equity in mind during this process by ensuring the definitions are based on observable behaviors and do not reinforce certain in-group behaviors. Consider how your definition is influenced by cultural norms that advantage individuals with certain backgrounds or educational experiences over others. For example, are formal diction, precise grammar, and a neutral accent critical for the competency of communication? Sometimes those kinds of indicators are legacies of historical exclusion that created “ceilings” for the advancement of leaders of different races, ethnicities, genders, castes, or other

Competencies Most Commonly Used by Nonprofits

Core Competencies

- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Equity mindset
- Mission orientation
- Ownership

Leadership Competencies

- Data-driven management
- Decision making
- Inclusivity
- Management under uncertainty
- Strategic thinking
- Team development and motivation

Source: The Bridgespan Group

markers of identity. Challenge yourself to think differently about your competencies—all of them—and about how you articulate what it takes to succeed.

While many organizations may simply select competencies directly from Bridgespan’s competency bank, you might also take inspiration from other sources, such as the competencies included in ProInspire’s [Leading for Race Equity Impact](#). In addition, many organizations choose to create or customize their own competencies to fit the specific needs of their organization.

Test and refine your competency list with input from key leaders and staff within your organization. First, review your list of competencies, sub-competencies, and scaled definitions, considering the following questions:

- Is there language that needs to be changed to be understood by your staff?
- Do the competencies align with your organization’s equity goals?
- Does the progression described in the scaled definitions reflect your organization’s needs?

Once you feel you have a solid list, solicit input from select staff members who represent a diversity of positions and backgrounds. You can solicit input through surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations.

After input has been collected, take time as a leadership team to review the feedback and refine your list of competencies. Decide whether you need to refine, add, or remove any competencies to arrive at a final working list of core and leadership competencies, sub-competencies, and scaled definitions. And be sure to communicate the final working list to staff so they can understand what will be expected of them.

Once you’ve gone through this initial process to confirm your competencies, consider revisiting the competencies every few years and refining them as needed to ensure continued alignment with your organization’s strategic goals.

CORE

Core competency: **Ownership**

Overall definition: Effectively manages own work, and work of teams when relevant, ensuring delivery of high-quality work

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Taking ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets established policies, quality and performance standards • Is responsive to supervisors, colleagues, and clients • Work products are complete, accurate, timely and understandable • Has a “get-it-done” mindset • Maintains confidentiality with sensitive information <p>Quality of work products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work products (e.g., reports, documents, files, etc.) are generally complete and accurate 	<p>Taking ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets and meets challenging goals for areas of responsibility • Identifies needed adjustments in own areas of responsibility • Tries alternative approaches when faced with obstacles and setbacks • Acknowledges and learns from mistakes without blaming others <p>Quality of work products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work products (e.g., reports, documents, files, etc.) are consistently complete and accurate 	<p>Taking ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assesses the consequence of errors upon others and takes accountability • Determines the resources needed to enable success and procures them • Has a consistent track record of always being prepared, delivering on time, and owning every details of their responsibilities • Sees their responsibility beyond the scope of their own work; views their team’s work as their responsibility <p>Quality of work products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a consistent track record of being prepared and delivering work that meets or exceeds expectations

The scaled decisions note specific behaviors that are part of early, intermediate, and advanced demonstration of this competency.

This competency has two sub-competencies: taking ownership and quality of work products.

Bridgespan’s competency bank can be found [here](#).

LEADERSHIP

Leadership competency: Decision making

Overall definition: Effectively structures and facilitates decision-making processes; makes decisions effectively and responsibly to improve organizational health and impact

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Gathering and interpreting data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing an understanding of what data needs to be gathered Able to read and interpret data <p>Executing decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies when to own the decision and when to include others Draws upon data, best practices, or specific job expertise to make timely decisions Effectively gathers input from stakeholders when appropriate – and incorporates diverse perspectives Effectively explains the rationale for decisions 	<p>Gathering and interpreting data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly identifies critical internal or external data needed to inform decision making Derives insights from data and makes suggestions based on findings <p>Executing decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes necessary decisions in a timely manner even when information is limited or unclear Considers implications of decisions and demonstrates follow through Owens and stands by team decisions Gains buy-in from team and other related stakeholders 	<p>Gathering and interpreting data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advises team members on deriving insights from data Creates and implements systems to facilitate regular data review, reflection, insight generation, and continuous improvement <p>Executing decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is trusted throughout the organization to make and follow through on decisions Considers both the long-term strategic direction and short-term outcomes of decisions Shares the consequences of past decisions with team to collectively guide future decision making Holds team accountable for decisions and progress against them

The scaled decisions note specific behaviors that are part of early, intermediate, and advanced stage demonstration of this competency.

This competency has two sub-competencies: gathering and interpreting data, and executing decisions

Bridgespan's competency bank can be found [here](#).

2 Co-create professional development plans using the 70-20-10 model

What are 70-20-10 development plans?

- First introduced by the [Center for Creative Leadership](#), the 70-20-10 model of development says that 70 percent of learning and development should come from on-the-job learning, 20 percent from coaching and mentoring, and 10 percent from formal learning through trainings, conferences, self-study, and other educational opportunities.

Why are 70-20-10 development plans important?

- The 70-20-10 approach to development highlights that the most effective professional development happens on the job. This job-related learning can range from special projects and stretch assignments to more modest expansions of a role. When tightly integrated with specific coaching and more formal learning opportunities, such learning can be especially powerful and effective.
- 70-20-10 plans both help individuals explicitly lay out the steps they will take to develop certain competencies and provide a way to share and track progress, allowing other mentors and managers to support individuals in their development.

Key resources

- [70-20-10 Development Plan Template and Guidance](#)
- [55 Competency-Based Ideas for Professional Development](#)

How to get started

Select one to three competencies to focus on. Staff members should reflect on their own ambitions and discuss them with their managers. Questions to consider include: “What would ‘wild success’ mean for my role for the next year?” and “Where do I hope to be professionally five to 10 years from now?” Staff members should use this forward-looking thinking to select the one to three competencies that would help them achieve those near-term and longer-term goals.

Fill in the development plan with actions or resources to develop each of the competencies. Development planning is more effective when guided by the 70-20-10 approach. In practice, this means staff members map out specific actions they will take for on-the-job learning (70 percent), coaching and mentoring (20 percent), and formal learning (10 percent) to help grow a specific competency. (One thing they won’t need to do, however, is measure 70 percent, 20 percent, and 10 percent; those ratios are just a guideline.) For each of the competencies selected, staff members should identify which resources they will leverage to help grow their skills, then fill them in on the [70-20-10 Development Plan Template](#).

Support direct report(s) in creating their development plans. The best plans are not created in isolation but are co-created and used by direct report and manager together.

In the co-creation process, take an asset-based approach by ensuring the focus and framing is on building individual strengths as opposed to solely remediating deficits. In addition, keep equity in mind by acknowledging any barriers to development staff members may experience, such as less access to growth opportunities and fewer supports for success, and brainstorming ways to remove these barriers.

Example 70-20-10 development plan

Name	Supervisor's name	Development period	Last updated
Willie B.	Grisel L.	Jan – June 2022	Jan 15 2022
Development plan			
Priority competency and development goal	On-the-job learning 70%	Coaching and Mentoring 20%	Formal learning 10%
<p>Ownership: Effectively manages own work, and work of teams when relevant, ensuring delivery of high-quality work.</p>	Serve on our "Housing" taskforce; assume responsibility for key deliverables and milestone tracking (with supervisor's support). Flag to supervisor if falling behind so we can jointly troubleshoot and make sure that effort is right-sized.	Solicit support from Elena (from our M&E team) to better understand how to build dashboards and internal tracking / monitoring systems. Get tools or templates from her as necessary.	Read "The 80/20 principle: The secret of achieving more with less."
<p>Decision making: Effectively structures and facilitates decision-making processes; makes decisions effectively and responsibly to improve organizational health and impact.</p>	Participate in the annual strategic planning process as a co-initiative lead; create a plan to solicit input and share that plan with my supervisor before starting.	Meet with Chief of Staff as a coach throughout the planning process; debrief after each key decision-making point and reflect on what worked well, what didn't, and what to do differently next time.	Read: Adams, M.G. 2009. "Change your questions, change your life: 10 powerful tools for life and work" to think about how best to solicit input.
	<i>Note to reader:</i>	<i>Note to reader:</i>	<i>Note to reader:</i>
	<i>These activities do <u>not</u> necessarily need to be large-scale. Identify actions that are incremental and deliberate: the focus should be on gradual growth that doesn't overwhelm you with additional responsibilities.</i>	<i>The main thing to figure out is <u>who</u> should be coaching; your supervisor may not be the right coach for each development priority. It should be someone with the right skills or expertise to coach you. The right coach may even be outside your organization.</i>	<i>This is often about inspiration or knowledge transfer to broaden your perspective or teach you codified tools or skills that may not be used within your organization.</i>

Choose between 1-3 priority competencies on which to focus for the time period of the plan.

This development plan template is available for download and tailoring to your organization [here](#).

3 Support ongoing development conversations

What are development conversations?

- Development conversations are two-way conversations in which a manager and direct report “check in” on a development plan and provide feedback to each other regarding what is going well and how to improve.
- The main goal of these conversations is for managers and direct reports to have consistent, productive conversations about growth and development centered on a set of competencies critical to success.
- Successful development conversations require managers to function more like coaches who have developed their own ability to help staff grow.

Why are development conversations important?

- Development conversations are really what makes this system of development work. Without strategies to support these conversations or accountability structures to ensure they happen, organizations run the risk of having 70-20-10 plans “sit on the shelf” and not actually be used to support the development of staff.

Key resources

- Bridgespan’s [Tips for Effective Coaching](#)
- National Equity Project’s [Coaching for Equity Resource Book](#)
- *Harvard Business Review*’s [“The Feedback Fallacy”](#)

How to get started

Decide on expectations for these conversations within your organization. Organizations should ensure managers and their direct reports dedicate time to discuss professional development and specifically to check in on their 70-20-10 plan.

Organizations should set expectations around the frequency of development conversations. Conversations should happen consistently—quarterly, at a minimum, though some organizations find more frequent pacing, such as every six weeks, is helpful so that staff don’t lose momentum. These meetings should be supplemented by ongoing feedback, particularly after a positive milestone or setback, to support ongoing staff development.

Help managers become effective coaches by pairing accountability with equitable supports. An important assumption driving the success of development conversations is that managers take on a coaching role and are willing and able to prioritize the growth and development of their direct reports. However, to be sure, there is an inherent risk in this dynamic: inequities could arise if managers coach in different ways and at different levels of consistency or quality. Organizations can minimize that risk by holding managers accountable for playing the role of a coach to their direct reports while providing them with equitable supports to help them succeed.

There are many ways organizations can support managers in this transition—really a mindset shift—from manager to coach. To start, consider these questions and related tactics:

- **What commitments will you ask managers to make?** Defining and clearly communicating shared expectations is an important first step to ensure those expectations are met (e.g., proactively scheduling and holding regular development conversations with direct reports). In addition, think through ways managers can model their own commitment to these principles.
- **Do managers need additional resources for professional development?** Consider what resources can be offered so managers can effectively support their direct reports and whether differential supports should be offered. At a minimum, offer trainings on the competencies prioritized by your organization as well as 70-20-10 plans to ensure managers and staff understand how to use these tools in practice.
- **How are we holding managers accountable?** Consider how you can elevate the visibility of those doing this work exceptionally and identify when managers are missing commitments or are off the mark. A concrete example we have seen at many organizations is to elevate “people development” as a leadership competency in and of itself, then identify ways to assess performance on this dimension by gathering feedback from staff.

- **How will we know if this process is equitable and inclusive?** One of the biggest risks of any type of talent-related process is that biases can hamper our judgment, leading us to be inadvertently unfair to the people we’re managing. How will you know if this is happening? Consider potential indicators (e.g., track who gets the most desirable stretch roles—a scarce resource—and disaggregate that data) and how you can gather input from a range of sources about how the process is going so you’re not limited by blind spots.

Lead by example at the executive level. If managers and their direct reports are expected to be serious about creating and using 70-20-10 plans, the leadership team should model the same commitment. Each member of the leadership team should have their own 70-20-10 plan that they’ve co-created with a manager (often a peer or board member, in the case of senior executives). When leadership team members share and reference their own development priorities and plans, it sends a message that growth is important, there’s no stigma around development planning, and it’s worth dedicating time to development.

When an organization’s top leaders model vulnerability—the idea that everyone, no matter their level or seniority, is still working to develop and improve—it can send a powerful message across the organization and create a sense of psychological safety for others across the organization to do the same.

4 Make it stick: Embed these tools into existing talent systems

Nonprofits and NGOs can help these tools and practices—competencies, development plans, and development conversations—gain traction within their organization with deliberate roll-out plans and by integrating with other talent systems.

Plan for an effective roll-out. As you prepare for this roll-out, your leadership team can ask the following questions:

- **With whom should we roll out the 70-20-10 process?** While some organizations choose to roll out leadership development to all staff, there are other options. They might fully implement only for managers, for example, with or without an abbreviated version for frontline staff. Or they might begin by testing out the process with a small group, then expanding the roll-out as time goes on.
- **How should we phase and pace the roll-out?** Organizations have different starting points, so they tend to set the speed and staging of their roll-out according to their individual situation. Organizations that have competencies in place already might start by implementing new competencies. Those already doing some development planning might roll out the new process as part of their next development cycle. And those doing this for the first time might roll out by region or department.
- **How can we most effectively communicate with staff about this process?** Staff members may be apprehensive if they hear rumors about new systems that have implications for their career. So it's important to have consistent talking points and a clear plan for communicating to staff members. Organizations might decide to gather wider input on the competencies in some form, as a way of helping to familiarize staff with the competencies and foster engagement with them, before rolling the system out.

Integrate competencies into talent-related processes across the organization. For these leadership development strategies to take hold, consider where and how they can be woven into the following staff-related systems or other processes unique to your organization.

- **Recruitment:** The competencies you elevated as critical for current staff should likewise be important as you recruit new individuals to join your organization. Consider incorporating competencies in job descriptions and touching on them explicitly in the interview process to ensure new employees know what it takes to succeed at your organization from day one.
- **Talent management:** You may already have an annual talent management cycle in place, such as doing performance reviews in the same month every year. Some organizations decide to add development planning to their existing cycles (e.g., following performance reviews, they might work with direct reports to identify development priorities and co-create an updated 70-20-10 plan). In this way, the development plan is distinct from the performance reviews but builds on job needs discussed during that process.
- **Succession planning:** One of biggest benefits of investing in the development of homegrown leaders within your organization is the clear bridge to succession-planning efforts. This is where coaching of talent against a set of leadership competencies can help ensure that you develop and retain the talent and leadership required to steward your organization and its impact for years to come.

Lastly, organizations will want to continually assess (using input from a diverse range of perspectives) how to keep refining their leadership-development system so that it's equitable and doesn't unintentionally include or reinforce barriers to development across lines of difference.