

NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: COMPETENCY BANK

Note to reader: In their work with us, nonprofit teams have identified a number of competencies that have been most helpful in their leadership development work. Included in these materials are a sample of the 10 most frequently selected competencies from recent years, along with sample scales that illustrate growth over time. We encourage you to use these materials as a starting place and review other existing banks found online to spur your thinking. For more information on Bridgespan's work, please see the [Bridgespan Leadership Accelerator](#) program or the [Nonprofit Leadership Development Toolkit](#), with its corresponding article, "[How Nonprofit Leadership Development Sustains Organizations and Their Teams](#)" for more information.

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

Core competency: **Adaptability**

Overall definition: Adapts and responds to change effectively; proactively seeks opportunities to be supportive of change and serve our mission

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Ability to adjust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates ability to adapt to changing circumstances • Remains calm in stressful situations <p>Openness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to new ideas and different perspectives 	<p>Ability to adjust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes work priorities to meet feedback and changing demands • Understands that the job sometimes encompasses a broader range of activities than the formal job description <p>Openness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to thoughtfully consider and embrace new ideas and different perspectives 	<p>Ability to adjust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models and encourages flexibility in peers and direct reports • Proactively seeks to learn new skills as needed <p>Openness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages individuals with different perspectives to share and creates an environment that is free from fear of repercussions of sharing candidly • Demonstrates the ability to change a strong perspective based on new ideas

Core competency: Collaboration

Overall definition: Helps colleagues as needed, views responsibilities as shared

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Team-orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizes the purpose and goals of the team Values and actively seeks input from all team members <p>Collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works cooperatively and respectfully with others 	<p>Team-orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focuses on accomplishing team goals rather than a personal agenda Willing to take on additional tasks as needed to achieve team objectives <p>Collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively participates as a team member and shows willingness to contribute and be open to feedback Identifies self and others' areas of expertise to ensure the right people are part of a team 	<p>Team-orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflects upon team goals and process and own contributions to continuously improve team performance <p>Collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriately applies areas of expertise and steps back and encourages others to apply their areas of expertise Promotes collaborative decision making processes and demonstrates ability to lead a team to reach consensus

Core competency: Communication

Overall definition: Uses effective written and oral communication with internal staff, teams, and community served; demonstrates empathy and listening

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Written communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writes clearly using correct spelling <p>Oral communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participates comfortably in small group meetings, contributing where appropriate <p>Inquiry and listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attends to messages from others; correctly interprets messages and responds appropriately 	<p>Both written and oral communication*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicates messages concisely Consistently adjusts style and tone to suit the target audience <p>Written communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicates goals, objectives and strategies frequently and aligns it with work and tasks <p>Oral communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizes techniques, such as silence, strategically to encourage others to expand their responses <p>Inquiry and listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates active listening Uses open-ended questions to clarify understanding and gain information Requests feedback and encourages others to share their point of view 	<p>Both written and oral communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectively influences decisions through logical, strategic communication and personal advocacy Is viewed by peers and others as an effective spokesperson for his or her field <p>Written communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributes to organization media, succinctly and effectively expressing ideas Writes grants and proposals (if applicable) in a concise, clear, and professional manner <p>Oral communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engages in public speaking or participates actively and comfortably in large group meetings <p>Inquiry and listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently uses thoughtful questions to advance the thinking of the team

*Category relates to both written and oral communication as well as strategic choice of format (written vs. oral)

Core competency: Equity mindset

Overall definition: Understands and is committed to goals of equity; consistently centers equity in the organization's work and workplace

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Awareness of equity issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of inequities that exist at multiple levels+ (personal, interpersonal, organizational, and systemic) • Is able to use appropriate vocabulary to describe inequities • Demonstrates a willingness to participate in organization-sponsored trainings on DEI and engage in active conversation on how to best incorporate strategies into practice. <p>Ability to actively combat inequities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands that the organization and programs may need to change in order to achieve goals around equity 	<p>Awareness of equity issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is aware that there are linkages between systems that perpetuate inequity (e.g., racial inequity, socio-economic inequity); understands how these systems impact the organization's work; is aware of the concept of intersectionality++ <p>Ability to actively combat inequities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can engage in dialogues about potential options to address inequities and tradeoffs between options • Can articulate logic chain behind specific linkages between systems; Has intuitive understanding of how the mechanisms of structural inequity operate and are sustained over time • Able to sustain commitment to the work of equity in meaningful ways that start to change existing inequities within the team and organization 	<p>Awareness of equity issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar with potential avenues for addressing structural inequities <p>Ability to actively combat inequities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embraces and leads changes that may need to occur to address equity • Helps to build safe and courageous spaces to reflect on progress, check-in across departments, and engage in equity-centered dialogue

+ Phyllis Jones, Camara. "Levels of Racism: A Theoretical Framework and a Gardener's Tale." 2000.

++Intersectionality is defined in *Merriam-Webster* as "The complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect." 6

Core competency: Mission-driven

Overall definition: Demonstrates commitment to the mission of the organization as a whole and alignment with organizational values

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Understanding and passion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a big-picture view of the role of the organization’s work in the community and understands broadly the types of work the organization does • Demonstrates enthusiasm and positivity for the mission • Demonstrates alignment with the organization’s stated values <p>Communicating about the mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can communicate the mission of the organization and purpose of own program area to immediate stakeholders (e.g., families, colleagues) <p>“One organization” outlook</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has an organization-wide mentality (vs. team or program/department) • When interacting with external stakeholders, communicates about the organization overall (vs. own program/department) • Welcomes opportunities to engage with other programs and departments 	<p>Understanding and passion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates compassion for populations served • Seeks to deepen understanding of challenges and circumstances impacting clients served <p>Communicating about the mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can clearly articulate the mission and a big-picture view of the organization’s work to broad set of stakeholders • Recognizes potential opportunities to deepen mission impact and communicates with others within the organization <p>“One organization” outlook</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positions work or team priorities in the context of organization priorities when explaining them to others • Proactively shares ideas or opportunities with colleagues in other programs or departments to support their work • Participates in organization-building activities, e.g., serving on org committees, mentoring staff across the organization 	<p>Understanding and passion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a nuanced understanding of needs of clients served <p>Communicating about the mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the unique impact of the organization’s work and can communicate it with others • Proactively seeks opportunities to bring the mission and impact of the organization’s work into external conversations • Cited as having inspired others with passion for the mission internally and/or externally <p>“One organization” outlook</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages and enables others to adopt an organization-wide mindset (vs. own program/department) and be a champion for the mission of the organization overall • Proactively seeks out connections and opportunities to collaborate with or support other programs and departments to advance the work • Provides support and mentorship to colleagues across the organization

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

Leadership competency: Deals with uncertainty

Overall definition: Identifies and assesses potential risks of a situation, and acts accordingly to mitigate them

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Identifying risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Proactively identifies potential risks that may be involved in an activity, projection, or scenario <p>Managing risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Helps evaluate possible solutions by evaluating risks	<p>Identifying risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Identifies root causes of potential risksAssesses potential risks of a situation from various lenses (including financial), and weighs as a tradeoff when making strategic decisions <p>Managing risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Identifies possible solutions to overcome potential risks	<p>Identifying risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Able to eliminate the root causes of potential risksProtects against the potential costs of risks by mitigating probability of occurring <p>Managing risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Accepts the consequences of risksDevelops contingency plans to execute should risk events occur, and executes effectively

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 • Owns 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

Leadership competency: Develops and motivates others

Overall definition: Motivates others and supports their development through strong coaching and mentoring

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Motivating/inspiring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizes exemplary performance <p>Coaching and mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invests in the ongoing professional development of staff Clearly communicates performance expectations and provides fair, actionable, and timely performance feedback Recognizes and actively works to mitigate the role of bias (e.g., similarity bias, opportunity bias, confirmation bias) when identifying talent to develop 	<p>Motivating/inspiring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for positive attributes and concretely reinforces them, promoting confidence and optimistic attitudes Provides a variety of motivational styles, as appropriate, to different team members <p>Coaching and mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses a range of tools and tactics to help staff of varying abilities grow Stays informed of development opportunities and resources within the organization and links staff to them where appropriate Provides development opportunities that actively combat systemic inequities Effectively addresses marginal and unsatisfactory performance 	<p>Motivating/inspiring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivates and inspires team members across the organization to achieve full potential through sharing success stories and learnings from struggles <p>Coaching and mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seen as a role model of “people development” within the organization Shares openly about own development; models importance of growth at all levels Supports the development of other coaches across the organization Creates systems to ensure that staff from a variety of backgrounds are provided opportunities to develop and thrive

Leadership competency: Manages with data

Overall definition: Understands data; analyzes data and identifies insights and implications

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Gathering and understanding data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Identifies relevant data needed (from both internal and external sources)● Able to read and extract insights from a range of data● Disaggregates data (e.g., by racial subgroup or by gender) to understand implications for diverse stakeholders <p>Using data to guide work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Uses data to guide their work – and work of direct reports	<p>Gathering and understanding data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Prioritizes data needed for making decisions and informing strategy/operations● Extracts sophisticated insights from complex data and understands the implications <p>Using data to guide work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Communicates implications of data within program/department and guides others given those implications● Actively works to incorporate implications of data disaggregation into solution generation or decision-making	<p>Gathering and understanding data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Fluent in organization-wide data (e.g., dashboards) and can speak to implications● Seeks out diverse inputs and uses them in a sophisticated way <p>Using data to guide work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Communicates implications of data within the broader organization and uses data to help position future possibilities

Leadership competency: Strategic thinking

Overall definition: Considers the future of the organization proactively and responsively; weighs diverse inputs to inform strategies; identifies innovative opportunities when relevant

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Gathering data/input</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Asks questions and identifies problems of own program/department● Has big-picture view of the organization; understands the mission, vision, unique approach, and values <p>Formulating strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Uses knowledge to provide input to strategy for program/ department	<p>Gathering data/input</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Uses multiples types of inputs to identify opportunities to improve program or work and impact—including external information <p>Formulating strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Suggests and implements strategies as appropriate based upon evidence and best practice● Weighs tradeoffs of decisions and strategic options from an organizational-level	<p>Gathering data/input</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Identifies opportunities for the organization to improve impact beyond own program area, and shares ideas with others <p>Formulating strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Weighs limitations like resources and staff when considering visionary ideas; can create big ideas but also understands implementation● Inspires others with forward-looking ideas to enhance impact

Leadership competency: Values and prioritizes inclusivity

Overall definition: Consistently sees, learns from, and takes strategic action related to diverse perspectives; and demonstrates the self-awareness and behaviors to work with stakeholders (of various identities and levels of power) respectfully and effectively. Actively seeks to build and retain a diverse workforce and fosters an equitable inclusive workplace.

Early stage	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>Valuing diverse perspectives and seeking to further learn from them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for and inquires about relevant diverse perspectives, including among stakeholders, and engages others in this inquiry Questions own assumptions related to diverse perspectives <p>Building and advancing diversity and inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates respectful interpersonal engagement across interactions with all members of the team and across lines of difference Actively recruits for relevant perspectives and from underrepresented populations Effectively addresses incidents of harassment, exclusion, or disrespect 	<p>Valuing diverse perspectives and seeking to further learn from them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questions own assumptions and receives feedback with gratitude about own impacts across diverse perspectives Takes power dynamics related to diverse perspectives into account Helps others learn the meanings of diverse perspectives before decisions are made <p>Building and advancing diversity and inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works actively to develop and retain the diversity of the workplace Works to mitigate implicit bias in decisions, policies, and practices Assembles diverse teams and guides team members to include and embrace relevant diverse perspectives Fosters team norms that assure an inclusive and equitable workplace climate 	<p>Valuing diverse perspectives and seeking to further learn from them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invests in the equitable participation of stakeholders representing relevant diverse perspectives Solicits and receives feedback about impact across diverse perspectives with gratitude and puts the feedback into action by making changes. Articulates how taking diverse perspectives into account enabled a decision or an outcome. <p>Building and advancing diversity and inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is a role model for respectful interpersonal engagement across diverse perspectives, for helping self and others address exclusion, harassment/disrespect, and for mitigating implicit bias from decisions, policies, and practices.