

CONNECTIONS

~ a quarterly newsletter from Careers In Nonprofits ~

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RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE: TIPS FOR THRIVING IN THE CURRENT ECONOMY



Working through challenges is nothing new to the nonprofit sector. Even in times of prosperity, nonprofits and associations face tight resources and boundless responsibilities. As a result, nonprofit professionals are accustomed to practicing good stewardship and doing more with less, working tirelessly to raise funds and awareness around their causes. This has never been truer than during the first half of 2009.

Seasoned nonprofit leaders know, however, that challenge is another word for opportunity, and when channeled properly, challenge can be a driving force for creativity and positive change. The challenges nonprofits face have changed from one season to the next. The difference-maker for successful nonprofits, though, has always been the way they adjust to the changes and improve their organization at the same time.

Accordingly, savvy nonprofits recognize in the current economy an opportunity to be more effective both in their offerings and in their operations. Many foundations are responding to the changing needs of grantees by offering more capacity building and general support, and nonprofits are finding ways to work cooperatively with sister organizations to serve communities in need.

In addition to these great ideas, our expertise in the nonprofit staffing world has taught us that the following simple, but effective, concepts will also help your organization rise to the challenge and thrive through the current economy and beyond:

1. Understand your staff as a valuable resource, and promote positive performance.
2. Take a strategic, long-term view of staffing whenever possible.
3. Evaluate your programs for effectiveness and efficiency and make the necessary adjustments.

Understand your staff as a valuable resource, and promote positive performance. There is no more valuable asset in your organization than the knowledge and experience base of your staff. When other resources are tight, it becomes even more critical to realize the potential contributions of every member of your organization. Promoting positive performance is a welcome contagion, sure to bring out the best in your staff. Do not overlook



IN THIS ISSUE

Rising to the Challenge: Tips for Thriving in the Current Economy

Client Feature: Rachel Abramson, HealthConnect One

NEWS YOU CAN USE

[Click here](#) for links to several articles from the Center for Nonprofit Advancement on the economy's impact on NPOs

[Click here](#) for results of the Nonprofit Finance Fund Survey

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to *Connections*, a quarterly newsletter from Careers In Nonprofits designed to keep you informed about nonprofit industry news. We would love to hear from you regarding ideas, topics of interest, and general feedback. Also, let us know if you would like to be a featured client in a future newsletter. We value your input and look forward to continued successes in our work together!



the value of volunteers, interns, and contingent staff to add significant contributions of their own at every level in your organization.

Take a strategic, long-term view of staffing whenever possible. Strategic planning is highly effective when accompanied by real and measureable outcomes that are meaningful to your organization. Strive to match your staffing plan to your operational goals, and make temporary and permanent hiring decisions accordingly. Take the time to write clearly defined job descriptions, and link every position to a productivity measure. Perform staff evaluations routinely so that everyone is held accountable for their part and knows what to expect.

Evaluate your programs for effectiveness and efficiency and make the necessary adjustments. Some programs and campaigns will stand out as you seek to respond to the changing needs of your constituents and beneficiaries. Take concrete steps to reorganize or forego programs that are not working, and maximize your organization's dollar in those that are. This may require consolidation of staff responsibilities, more strategic use of volunteers and interns, or creation of new positions. The changes will be cost-justified if they increase productivity around operational goals and help your organization to provide better services.

Has your organization implemented other innovations? We are interested in hearing them and sharing your experiences with our readers. Email your input to info@careersinnonprofits.com with "Rising to the Challenge" in the subject line.



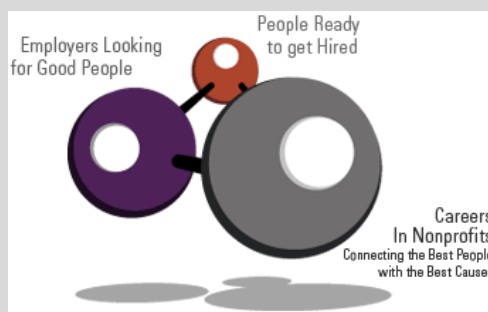
CLIENT FEATURE: RACHEL ABRAMSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HEALTHCONNECT ONE

Rachel Abramson is Executive Director of HealthConnect One, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that promotes the health of mothers, babies, and their families by providing training and technical assistance to direct service providers. Formerly known as Chicago Health Connection, HealthConnect One is nationally recognized for their innovative approach to reducing infant mortality and improving health through Breastfeeding Peer Counselor and Community-Based Doula programs. Rachel has been involved with HealthConnect One since its inception in 1986 and has served as the organization's Executive Director since 1989. She came into the role from a professional background as a nurse in maternal and child health. It was not a straight line from nursing to leading HealthConnect One, but it makes perfect sense in retrospect that she would devote her professional life to mothers and babies and the connections between them.

In the hospital setting, Rachel became very aware of her limits as a white, middle-class nurse to have meaningful influence on the personal health decisions of women of low income in communities of color. Even with her commitment, passion, education, and experience as a breastfeeding mother, the medical information she could offer regarding breastfeeding and infant mortality reduction was not enough to support these women through their decisions. Rachel felt then and believes now that having peer support would be a critical piece in their success. Together with several colleagues, she formed a

CAREERS IN NONPROFITS

Careers In Nonprofits is a full-service staffing firm serving associations and nonprofit organizations in Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC. We are the nonprofit staffing experts, providing a winning process for temporary, temp-to-perm, and permanent searches, from entry to executive level.



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breastfeeding awareness program, identifying leadership that already existed within the communities served. This original program was the birth of Chicago Health Connection, now HealthConnect One (HC One). What began with a narrow focus on breastfeeding and infant mortality reduction developed into a broader commitment to promoting maternal and child health.

Today, HC One is a training and technical assistance agency for frontline health providers, such as peer counselors, community and lay health workers, and a variety of programs that integrate their expertise into health promotion. More recently, HC One has expanded into an advocacy role, developing public funding, new programs, and new policy initiatives for projects and agencies involved in maternal-child support.

We spoke to Rachel to learn more about her experience in successfully leading HC One from its inception through its current state and what she has learned along the way.

Q. Has the current economic climate prompted you to be more creative in your work? If so, how?

A. We live in the world of nonprofits, and we see other organizations downsizing and some going out of business. It is a very challenging time for us all. At HealthConnect One, we were very fortunate in that we spent some time doing strategic planning just before the economy started sliding. As a result, we have been a lot more focused in figuring out how to manage during this time than we might have been otherwise. Still, we have had to be very creative in finding new partners, figuring out what services we can provide to match the changing needs of partner agencies, and focusing on projects that can lead to measurable outcomes.

The work that we do supporting mothers and families that face a lot of obstacles when they are pregnant, birthing, and working to raise healthy, smart, creative kids is considered more and more important. We have had to figure out new ways to be involved in that conversation and have become quite involved on the national level in the planning of family support and maternal-child promotion, as well as inserting the outcomes that we consider important. Historically, HealthConnect One has worked pretty close to the ground with grass roots organizations in underserved communities. Now, we are doing more policy work and talking about the issues on both a statewide and national level, engaging stakeholders to talk about what strategies would be most effective in addressing maternal-child health. This broader collaborative work is new for us and comes from the new political environment that we live in. We are not happy about the needs today's families are facing, but the timing of the economic situation and new administration has allowed us to move into these new areas.

Q. What practices have been effective for you in leading your organization through challenging financial times?

A. It is very difficult for nonprofits to carve out the time to do planning because we are so engaged with the communities we serve. For HC One, it was a supportive funder, the Irving Harris Foundation, who helped us to make the decision to move into strategic planning. Over the years, as a small nonprofit, we had to be able to make strategic decisions based on the money that was coming in or not coming in; we developed the systems financially and strategically to do a quick pivot when plans we had were not funded, and in turn, to move forward when we did get funding.

We have always based our work on strong relationships with partners—community health workers we have trained, funders, academic institutions—and as we have grown, we have developed systems that made that process stronger and learned to communicate more effectively. Those relationships are an essential piece of our being able to stay afloat these days.



Q. What are some best practices you have identified for hiring/managing staff and measuring staff performance?



A. This is an area that is very important. It has taken us a long time, but we have implemented the practice of reflective supervision in our own organization as we have promoted that practice for new community health worker programs and breastfeeding peer counselor programs. Carving out a regular, weekly supervision time where phone calls are not answered and interruptions are postponed, where you are there to support, challenge, and listen to staff, allows people to deal with personally challenging work without burning out. It shows a commitment to the staff's own development and career goals and a broader sense of what the critical objectives are both for them and for the organization. Over the years we have gotten better at that, and I have gotten clearer about it with organizations developing these programs. We have a team-based culture at HC One, so the interviewing and hiring process includes a number of different people, which has been helpful.

Q. What is the best piece of advice you could offer to nonprofit leaders facing similar challenges?

A. Rely on your own support systems, whether family, peers, board, or your own staff, and make sure that you are supporting your staff through the challenges. I also think now is a time to be a little entrepreneurial. In the for-profit sector, the creative, flexible, smart agencies thrive during bad times, even when other organizations are going down, and that is also true in nonprofits. The work we are doing now may be different from what we are accustomed to doing, but it is important to find those areas—such as IT and infrastructure—that we may not be used to developing but that can help us to survive and thrive.

Q. What are some resources that have been helpful to you in your work as an Executive Director?

A. I have to mention Careers In Nonprofits. It was unlikely that I would make the investment in an outside agency to do recruitment and screening for my new hires, but I am really glad that I did it. They were professional and thoughtful, and I really trusted the advice I got. I ended up with a really excellent Office Manager, who is much more than an Office Manager.

I attended an Executive Director's retreat led by consultants Laura McAlpine and Mary Morton and co-sponsored by Careers In Nonprofits, which is probably the reason I took that leap. It was an opportunity to get to know other EDs who were facing similar issues, to open up my own channels, and it led to a willingness to work differently in my organization. The ED group has been an ongoing source of support. I feel like I can always get a lot more done by working together with others than I can by myself. In fact, HC One shares space with another nonprofit organization, and we have committed to moving to another space, still sharing.

I also consider HC One supporters and stakeholders to be valuable resources. I have really honest, reflective conversations with my funders, my donors, and my board. I learned a long time ago that when reality does not match the proposal you wrote, you have to talk it through with your funder. A good funder has as much stake in the success of your program as your organization does, so everybody wants to make it work.

Q. What do you think your greatest challenge will be in the next six to 12 months and beyond?

A. In the next six to 12 months, I think we will be undergoing growth, so we will face some strategic decisions about which areas should be growing, what areas of the work we would like to open up, and how to balance all of the change. Although I am not yet ready to retire—I have quite a bit more working life ahead of me—in the long term, succession and sustainability of the organization is my one key challenge. I think the work we have done is worth a lot and I would like to see it thrive past my work.