

*Human Resource Management in the Nonprofit Sector:
Passion, Purpose and Professionalism*

Edited by Ronald J. Burke & Cary L. Cooper
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NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, AS THE MISSION-DRIVEN AGENTS OF CHANGE, ARE moving from the margins to the centre of our social fabric, especially as government spending on social programs, as a proportion of total spending, decreases. Alongside the rapid growth of the sector is increased scrutiny of nonprofit operational practices, increased competition for donor dollars, and the need for expert advice on how best to manage nonprofit organizations. This, coupled with the fact that the largest cost associated with running a nonprofit is human resources (typically 70-80% of the total operating budget), makes the need for effective HR practices crucial.

A few books, one of the most widely touted being Peter Drucker's *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* (1990), have tackled the broader topic of nonprofit management, including human resource management for nonprofit board and management leaders. In *Human Resource Management in the Nonprofit Sector*, Ronald J. Burke and Cary L. Cooper bring together the research and writing of 22 experts in the field of nonprofit management from universities in North America and the UK to more closely examine human resources management in the nonprofit sector.

Human Resource Management in the Nonprofit Sector tackles a wide-ranging compendium of research and current academic thinking, addressing such concepts as leadership and board development brand identity, staff and volunteer learning and skill development, diversity, and organizational change. As a compilation of material on topics already quite well understood by experts in the sector, the book will likely be a useful text for graduate level programs in nonprofit management.

Each chapter surveys a vast array of research, most of which references work done in the last decade, and ends with a summary of conclusions and, in some chapters, practical implications and/or future research directions. Part I, "Setting the Stage," explores the phenomenal growth of nonprofits; the scope and significance of the nonprofit sector; challenges, issues and trends; and the role nonprofits play in society. Part II, "Human Resource Management and Nonprofit Effectiveness," delves into aspects of human resources management and general areas of nonprofit management, and Part III, "Developing Human Resource Management Skills," provides the concluding chapter on university-based programs in nonprofit management.

As a survey of research and writings on the topic, the book has limited relevance for human resources professionals or nonprofit leaders seeking to innovate or advance beyond

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the traditional and/or current realities of nonprofit management. It instead attempts to survey the vast body of research and writing (with literally hundreds of references drawn from literature reviews) to touch on much of the current thinking in each area covered in its disparate chapters.

The challenge with the book is that its ambitious attempt to capture and deal with such a range of topics and ideas results in an often dense and sometimes impenetrable read. Rather than reaching any particular conclusions or recommendations, each chapter remains a collection of concepts and ideas, often with the disclaimer that the compilation is a “foundation to build upon” or an opportunity for further research. By virtue of what it attempts to cover, the book does not impart any key insights or make any compelling argument for findings that might differentiate successful nonprofits. In fairness, it seems intended for an academic audience.

An example of the challenge the book presents is the material focused on nonprofit brands and brand management. While brand management is critical to a nonprofit’s ability to make a case for support in an ever-more crowded marketplace, the chapters seem misplaced in a book dedicated to human resources management. The notion of “employer brand” is touched on only briefly in the second of two chapters dedicated to the brand management topic. In fact, for human resources professionals in the nonprofit context, the real challenge is to connect brand identity to the internal culture and experience so that there is an inherent understanding of “fit” for those who choose to work and volunteer with an organization. Had the chapters focused on the relationship between human resources, and marketing and communications, it would have provoked a more relevant examination of the need for alignment of an organization’s overall positioning and value delivery, both internally and externally.

Other chapters that deal with the literature related to the anticipated future-leadership deficit, increasing workloads, the complexities of managing diversity, rising skill requirements, constraints on long-term planning, and change management contain some valuable reference points. A number of the areas of research include some valuable lessons relevant to other sectors as well.

On the basis of hours contributed by staff and volunteers, it can be said nonprofits are the country’s largest “employer.” As a number of authors in *Human Resource Management in the Nonprofit Sector* point out, the sector has been slow to accept the value of management education and business practices because of an underlying belief that “management” means “business management.” The authors argue that nonprofits should begin to examine staff and volunteer engagement as part of an integrated approach to the business of running an organization, so that nonprofit business strategy translates into an effective workforce (staff and volunteer) strategy to deliver on the goals.

In a societal context in which nonprofits, the private sector, and governments are increasingly inter-dependent, some researchers and nonprofit leaders have begun to identify distinct values, skills, and competencies required for good nonprofit management. However, the basic premise that human resource management in the nonprofit sector is somehow unique or different from good HR practice in any company or organization may be a limiting view. Apart from the obvious reality that human resources

in nonprofits must effectively deal with both staff and volunteers, in fact the HR practices themselves are largely the same as those of the private sector (with the exception of compensation). It could be argued that the best methodologies and research on human resources management are therefore cross-sectoral. This is especially true given that many nonprofits run quite separate human resources and volunteer management functions.

The wealth of references contained in *Human Resource Management in the Nonprofit Sector* is impressive and useful in an academic context. While the book has limited relevance to the practitioner and does not clearly differentiate high-impact nonprofits or share any key lessons learned, it will provide those studying the work of the nonprofit sector with an encyclopedic look at human resources practices and trends in the nonprofit sector.