



K O O T E N A Y B O U N D A R Y
Community Services Co-operative

Emerging Non-Profit Leadership in the Kootenay Boundary Region

**Summary Report from the
May 16 and 17, 2011 Conversations on Emerging Leadership**

What Transpired

On May 16 and 17, the Kootenay Boundary Community Services Co-op (KBCSC) hosted two days of discussions on the topic of emerging leadership in the region's non-profit sector (focused on paid leadership in the sector, such as the executive director role). The KBCSC invited Barbora Farkasova and Justin Ho of the United Community Services Co-op of BC to help facilitate both conversations.

The structure of both conversations was fairly open and fluid. The session on May 16 (held in Kaslo) involved executive directors and board members of the KBCSC's owner-membership while the session on May 17 (held in Nelson) was with a self-identified group of emerging leaders in the non-profit sector.

Six themes and ideas from the first session were documented and shared with the participants of the second session. Key points from both sessions are compiled here in this summary document.

1. What is Leadership?

Defining leadership may sound like a simple question, but very different answers can materialize. Current executive directors defined leadership at more of the macro or even theoretical level. Emerging leaders drilled down more into the definition of leadership, offering more concrete characteristics.

Thoughts from **current EDs** and **board members**:

- **Then and now** – The changing circumstances in which current leaders must operate was clearly recognized. While some current ED's relate to the importance of "making a difference", the need to fully understand what "making a difference" means to emerging leaders was identified.
- **The inspiring intangibles** – There is an inspirational aspect to leadership within a non-profit and a focus on the intangibles of the job was clear.
- **Leadership needs to be "experienced"** – Providing emerging leaders with opportunities to stretch their leadership abilities (such as providing flexibility and control over their own program) was identified as an effective way of offering support to them.

Thought from **emerging leaders**:

- **Vision and inspiration** – Emerging leaders noted the importance of "vision" and "inspiring others" as a key leadership skill.
- **Decision making amongst all the grey** – There was a strong recognition that the work done by non-profits is complex. There are few circumstances where making decisions is "black or white." However, a strong sense from the group was that a leader must be able to recognize that complexity and still be decisive when required.
- **Importance of board leadership** – The group spent much time discussing and emphasizing the important role of boards in providing leadership to ED's and the kinds of support that would help board volunteers recognize and fulfill their leadership responsibilities.

2. Attributes and Skills Needed to Lead a Non-Profit

Focusing on identifying the attributes and skills needed to be the leader of a non-profit organization, current leaders discussed the "softer" qualities rather than the technical qualities of leadership. Emerging leaders also placed high value on the softer skills and went further to unpack the differences between the attributes of a leader versus the attributes of a manager.

Thoughts from **current EDs** and **board members**:

- **Creative/entrepreneurial/opportunistic** – Although very different, these three characteristics were often cited together as a way to articulate the unique entrepreneurial acumen needed in the ever changing funding landscape often faced by non-profit leaders.

- **Values driven/enthusiastic/strategic** – These characteristics represent another unique combination of skills and attributes of a non-profit leader. Both groups noted all of these important qualities, but the addition of ‘strategic’ to the mix during the current leadership conversation provided some grounding to the other attributes not clearly articulated in the conversations the following day.
- **Trust/collaborative/comfortable within the “grey”** – A third grouping of attributes highlighted the high level of inter-personal and relationship building skills emphasized by current leaders, particularly important in a working and environment that values multiple, and sometimes contradicting, perspectives and viewpoints.

Thought from **emerging leaders**:

- **Building collective ownership** – Collaboration was a key theme for emerging leaders. Particularly valued was the ability of a leader to foster collective ownership of an organization’s mission or vision by its staff and volunteers.
- **Manager versus leadership** – A detailed conversation by emerging leaders began to unpack the difference between leadership (the ability to motivate and inspire people to a vision) and management (the ability to operationalize a vision to get results and outcomes). Questions emerged about whether you could be a good leader without being a good manager (no, maybe?) and whether you could be a good manager without being a good leader (yes, maybe?)

3. Training, Experiences, Knowledge, and Supports Required

By unpacking the various training and supports required to help emerging leaders along the path to current leadership, a lot of synergies emerged. Some common themes from both groups were:

- **Mentorship** – Both groups identified mentorship opportunities as being very valuable.
- **Job shadowing** – Providing hands-on exposure to the full scope of the ED job was seen as important. Both groups were interested in developing opportunities to job shadow a current ED.
- **Hands-on leadership experience** – While training and workshops are important, both groups highlighted the need for emerging leaders (within their agencies) to be provided with opportunities to utilize skills and put theories to practice (i.e. more leadership responsibilities in their program areas and hands-on leadership experiences/training programs).
- **The lack of training opportunities** – A common complaint from both groups was the lack of formal training in both leadership and management skills in the region and the barriers faced in trying to access training (travel, time, cost, etc.).

Thoughts from **current EDs** and **board members**:

- **Financial training** – The need for exposure and training on financial literacy (financial statements, fund development, etc.) was noted.

- **Communicate and share knowledge** – There was recognition that current leaders need to do a better job of communicating and sharing their knowledge with emerging leaders.
- **Learning to follow** – The conversation around leadership sparked an interesting counterpoint about the value and the need to support the skill of “following”. Often the need for leadership skills is emphasized, but there is an equal need to recognize the importance of how does one best “follow” leadership.

Thought from **emerging leaders**:

- **Support groups and ways to connect with each other** – There was an appetite from the emerging leaders group to have more opportunities to connect and support each other.
- **Support needs to be both ways** – Emerging leaders stressed that current and emerging leaders have knowledge to share with others as well as learn from others.
- **Training needs** – Emerging leaders identified a need for training in the following areas: board development, organizational development, strategic planning, and facilitation (groups and meetings).

4. The Job and Job Structure

When asked about the job of the ED, the two groups identified the same issues with the same two priorities – the job is too big, and salary and compensation is too low.

Some thoughts from both **current EDs/board members** and **emerging leaders** about the job structure:

- **Job sharing** – Given that the duties of an ED are recognized as being huge and complex, both groups were interested in the idea of job sharing. Splitting up of responsibilities might help to get the best talent to take on these roles in the future.
- **Separating leadership from management** – Both groups noted the difference in skills and talents needed for leadership versus management. Exploring a separation along these lines when revising an ED job description and a job sharing opportunity may be a good place to start.
- **The job is tailored to the person** – There was interest from both groups to develop a template job description for an ED position. However, ED jobs today are very much tailored to the individual currently holding the role.
- **Leadership not just the ED** – Leadership opportunities and “opportunities to shine” need to occur more often outside of the ED role. There needs to be work done to recognize these non-traditional leadership efforts (both formally and informally), particularly in smaller and more flat organizations.
- **Salary and compensation** – Stagnant salaries over many years and an overall lower level of pay was highlighted by both groups as a real problem for recruiting and maintaining leadership in the sector (whether current or emerging).

- **Benefits** – It was recognized that benefits will be an area where non-profits can provide some competition to other industries and should strive to do so. Providing childcare support was one such benefit that was noted during the discussions.
- **It used to be easier** – Current leaders spoke about how the nature of organizations and the ED role has changed a lot over the years (“it used to be easier”). Some current leaders even asked the question, “Why would an emerging leader want the ED job today?” – A bit of a rhetorical question recognizing the complexity of the job today, but also hypothesizing what would be the motivation of today’s emerging leaders to strive for an ED position in the non-profit sector?
- **Value of the sector not recognized** – Both groups recognized the role that society in general plays in the structural challenges facing paid employment in the sector. Jobs in the sector aren’t highly valued by the public. Investing in quality administration (including the pay of EDs and other management staff) at a reasonable level is not looked upon very favourable as well. Collective work to change this perception is needed.

5. Local Context

The themes from current and emerging leaders were similar in terms of how the local context affects the ability of non-profits to recruit and support emerging leaders. The themes were:

- **Higher unemployment** – Unemployment is higher in this region than in other regions and a higher level of seasonal employment changes the nature of employment in the region.
- **Few leadership positions available** – There are fewer ED opportunities in the region than elsewhere.
- **Logistics of leadership** – The expansive geography of the region has an impact on the job. In order for leaders to collaborate, travel is required with associated pressures around transportation and services like childcare.
- **Desire to stay here** – People want to live in the region. This provides some draw to the region and pressures around employment, but may also different pressures on salary expectations given the differing nature of demand for work.
- **Competition for employees** – Every region has different employer competitors to the non-profit sector, including the Kootenay Boundary region. Some were identified, such as the Columbia Basin Trust, the colleges in the region, as well as more active provincial government ministries.
- **Cost of living pressures** – The cost of living in the region was clearly a concern for everyone, particularly emerging leaders who want to be in the sector but struggle with the disparity between salary and cost of living.
- **A different culture** – Both groups pointed out the different way of life in the region, in particular the less emphasis on the materialistic and a different connection to values. It should be noted that this was still mentioned within the strong consensus that inadequate salaries and compensation is a priority issue that needs to be addressed.

6. *Moving Forward and the Role of the KBCSC*

Some next steps were identified on how to move forward with the ideas generated from the two discussions.

Thoughts from **current EDs** and **board members**:

- **Excitement to “let go of the job”** – There needs to be more willingness to see young leaders step into positions and also a reduction of fear on the part of current leaders to let go.
- **More openness with boards about retirement** – More commitment on the part of EDs to be open with their boards on their retirement plans so proactive planning can take place around succession. There was an overall feeling that there needs to be more open communication on the topic.
- **Explore ways to share** – There was a sense that current EDs do want more opportunities to share their duties when possible to expose emerging leaders to varying aspects of the role.
- **The already retired** – What role do former retired EDs want to play in supporting emerging leadership in the sector?

Thought from **emerging leaders**:

- **Stay connected** – Emerging leaders want more opportunities to come together like they did on May 17th to discuss issues and stay connected. Current leaders also expressed interest in supporting emerging leaders to come together, perhaps in a “think tank” kind of way.
- **Work with KBCSC** – Much of what is listed as potential next steps for the KBCSC was echoed by emerging leaders. There was strong interest to support and attend activities that might be undertaken by the KBCS Co-op to support emerging leaders.

Potential activities for the KBCSC to pursue:

- **Job description template** – Craft an ED job description template by compiling current job descriptions for ED’s in the region. A follow-up activity could be to ask emerging leaders to react to the job description and provide feedback or craft their own job description.
- **Host more conversations on the topic** – Continuing to convene these types of conversations was of keen interest to both groups. One suggestion was to facilitate a joint conversation with ED’s and emerging leaders.
- **Share resources and stories** – There is an appetite to learn from others about what has worked well. Some stories were shared during the sessions and these need to be more formally documented and shared.
- **Explore mentoring and job shadowing opportunities** – There may be a way for such programs to be run effectively through the KBCSC.
- **Training** – KBCSC could develop and offer some joint training opportunities on the topic areas identified by emerging leaders
- **Value of the sector** – The KBCSC could also play a role to collectively support efforts by the sector to grow its brand and recognition amongst funders and the public.