



GiveSmart

Donor Decision Tool

How to Research a Nonprofit's Organization and Operations

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

www.GiveSmart.org

For a more extensive review of an organization's operations and organizational strengths, you may want to ask yourself the following list of questions:

Leadership

- Do members of the leadership team appear to work together in a way that enables them to be effective?
- Are the executive director and board clear on the organization's key priorities, and have they communicated these priorities to funders and other members of the organization? (For example, if you do a site visit, do the staff members you meet relate the same priorities as the executive director?) Do staff appear to understand the decision making behind these priorities?
- Can the leadership team translate key priorities into specific initiatives? Do these priority initiatives have the resources they require? (For example, if a major strategic priority is to track outcome measures, does this responsibility fall within someone's job description?)

Ask: Can the leadership team translate key priorities into specific initiatives?

Decision-making and structure

- Does the organization have a clear structure with defined reporting relationships?
- Is there evidence that the organization can make important decisions efficiently and effectively? (An example of an important decision might be moving away from a program area or declining a funding opportunity that was judged to be off-strategy.) Are decisions made within a length of time that feels reasonable to the people involved?
- Can the organization implement these decisions?

People

- Does the organization appear to be able to attract and retain talented people?
- Do the organization's leaders or staff seem to be concerned about unusually high turnover rates, or are turnover rates in line with position norms? You would not want senior leadership turnover rates to be high, but for some frontline staff positions (such as social workers), high turnover rates are the norm.

- Do staff members have the skills they need to do their jobs? There can always be a few “stretch” positions, but overall the organization should be able to attract experienced people to fill most roles.
- Do professional development opportunities appear to be available to employees? (For example, do leaders give the people working below them responsibilities outside of their job descriptions?) Do staff members receive on-the-job training and mentorship?
- Is there an established employee performance review process and opportunities for upward feedback? Does the organization follow up on performance reviews?
- If organizational area gaps exist (such as fundraising or marketing), do managers have a clear plan to fill them and a sense of the investment required?
- Are there succession plans in place for key leadership positions?

Ask: Do staff members have the skills they need to do their jobs?

Work processes and systems

- Are the organizational structure and job descriptions clear?
- Does the organization have the resources it needs, in terms of both people and infrastructure (for example, updated IT systems, financial and payroll systems, a safe and functional working environment)?

Culture

- Do staff appear to be inspired by the organization’s goal and its leadership? Are they engaged with the mission, and do they indicate commitment to the organization? Do you see evidence of staff striving to achieve exceptional results as opposed to doing the minimum to get by?
- Does the organization have the capacity (people, time, resources) for change? Is there evidence that the organization monitors and course-corrects when implementing changes?

SOURCES USED FOR THIS ARTICLE:

- Selected questions from the Bridgespan Organizational Diagnostic Survey. This survey was developed by The Bridgespan Group, with the generous support and permission of Bain & Company, for use with nonprofit organizations.