

# How the Y Supports and Develops Its CEOs—and What Other Nonprofits Can Learn from It

Strong CEOs attract strong board members and encourage strong governance. With weak CEOs, the board weakens over time and governance challenges grow from there, says Neil Nicoll, the outgoing president and CEO of YMCA of the USA (Y-USA), the national resource office for 2,700 YMCAs across the country.

“We know from research that there is a clear, direct correlation between the skills of CEOs and the success of local YMCAs,” says Nicoll. And as a national network that replaces 100 to 110 of its 900 CEOs each year due mainly to retirement, capitalizing on this correlation is essential to the continued success of local YMCAs. But how does a national network build the skills necessary to successfully lead a YMCA at the local level? And how does it build a culture that embraces the Y cause and shares its priorities?

Y-USA’s answer was to create the Cause-Driven Leadership® Competency Model. “We could not take this large network and attempt to get the alignment we wanted if we didn’t have our CEOs understanding what it meant to lead a YMCA and the culture we were trying to create,” Nicoll says. At the heart of the model is the Y’s cause—strengthening communities. Accordingly, the network uses structured leadership development and training to help CEOs build skills that support the cause. “We recognized that we had to create an understanding among our CEOs that the Y is more than activities for the sake of activities; there is a reason for each and everything we do,” Nicoll adds.

## The Model

The Y supports and develops its senior leaders' talents in four broad categories encompassing a total 18 competencies, which are defined by leadership level. The four disciplines of the competency model are:

- **Mission Advancement:** advancing the Y's promise to strengthen community
- **Collaboration:** working with, understanding, and developing others
- **Operational Effectiveness:** ensuring relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability
- **Personal Growth:** developing continually to adapt to new challenges



The broad categories were developed based on extensive research into the views and needs of the member branches as well as external research of best-in-class competency models. “We have data that the movement said these competencies at these leadership levels are most important,” says Terri Radcliff, vice president of talent and knowledge management for Y-USA. “So we were able to say, ‘These [competencies] are the things that we most want to make sure new CEOs have some investment when it comes to their leadership development.’”

Leadership Certification, the Y’s leadership credentialing process, was entirely designed around this goal, so it provides both support and development opportunities for up-and-coming leaders at the YMCA. Some CEOs follow the Traditional Pathway, which is designed for YMCA staff who gradually grow in position and responsibility within the Y network. Professionals progress through three levels of certification: Team Leader, Multi-Team or Branch Leader, and finally the Organizational Leader Certification.

The Bridge Program is for professionals new to the Y who begin their careers as Multi-Team or Branch Leaders, Organizational Leaders (C-level positions), and CEOs. The program is designed to prepare those who join the Y at higher levels for Cause-Driven Leadership through training, experience, and a network of support. Just as with the Traditional Pathway, professionals are required to go through a certification process that corresponds to the progressive levels of leadership in the network.

The CEO Bridge Program, launched three years ago, helps CEOs who are new to the Y, or even new to the nonprofit sector, learn about what it means to be a YMCA CEO and offers them an accelerated pathway to earning the required Organizational Leadership Certification. “The trend has been that we’re hiring more people into these CEO roles who either have not previously been a CEO of a Y or a CEO in the nonprofit sector,” says Radcliff. “While a majority still move up through the ranks of the Y, more and more are being hired as what we call ‘bridgers.’ What we developed is really for all CEOs, but with special emphasis on those who are new to the Y, to give them a way to think about being strategic, cause-driven leaders.”

“The primary purpose is to really make sure we have the most qualified, the most competent, the most strategic, and the most cause-driven CEOs in our YMCAs across the country,” Radcliff adds.

While this may sound very philosophical, it’s actually very hands-on; all of the program’s requirements and experiences are designed to teach leaders about how the Y functions and creates impact. A new CEO has three years from when he or she starts to complete the seven components of the Organizational Leadership Certification.

1. **New CEO Institute:** A three-and-a-half-day learning experience outlining the role of a Y CEO and the resources and structure of the Y Network, including an overview of the CEO's responsibilities and the support available to them.

2. **Principles and Practices:** Two full days of experiential learning focused on what it means to be part of the Y network, including lessons learned from a panel of veteran YMCA CEOs and a case study of challenges leaders may encounter in their roles.

3. **Leadership Competency Assessment:** The Y's 360-degree assessment process designed to identify strengths and opportunities in a leader's capabilities and style. The leader is reviewed by a coach who helps create and launch a leadership development plan.

4. **Structured Peer Visit:** An on-site visit to another YMCA, which provides an opportunity for new CEOs to share and learn from peers.

5. **Course on Board Leadership:** A competency-based module focusing on effective practices for working with and leading local boards.

6. **Course on Leading Change:** Another competency-based module covering the elements of effective change efforts. Each participant undertakes a change project within his or her organization to apply the principles learned in this course.

7. **Capstone:** A final report summarizing the Leading Change project, highlighting what the leader did, what he or she learned, and what impact it has had on the organization and community. The report is shared with another CEO, a local board member, and members of Y-USA training staff.

As much as the YMCA and the new CEO might like the process to be shorter, experience has shown that it's best to spread it out over three years to accommodate all the other demands a new CEO is likely facing.

"A new CEO might be going into a YMCA that is in a turnaround situation, or at a very large YMCA, the CEO might be inundated with demands from their community and from the board," Radcliff says. "It's a bit of a commitment to pull themselves out of the CEO role to focus on their own development as leaders. We want to give them enough time to strategically have those immediate challenges faced, as well as the opportunity to apply what they're learning through the certification process to their jobs."

Particularly valuable to Phillip Borup, CEO of the Butte Family YMCA in Butte, Montana, has been the 360-degree assessment, which has influenced his work in other parts of the program, including the Leading Change course and the Capstone project. Borup had 20 colleagues, peers, subordinates, and board members anonymously rate him on the Y's core competencies. Then he rated himself. "We see ourselves in the light of what we think and what our intentions are," Borup says. "Others see us based on our actions and what we say, so you need to have

a little bit of the balance.” This self-reflection helped him see the skill sets that leaders in the movement need to affect change. “If you’re closed-minded, you may ultimately just end up leading a ‘gym and swim’ and not really affecting the cause the way you should in your community.”

The CEO Bridge Program also provides an opportunity for new CEOs to build a network with other YMCA leaders. This is essential because the organization is extremely relationship-based. Borup says that these interactions have helped him bring new programming for teenagers to his own organization. “I looked around and I talked with other YMCAs, and they were all happy to share. And the next thing you know, we have our own program here,” Borup says. “That wouldn’t have happened, in my mind, if we wouldn’t have promoted a culture within the Y that you can pick up the phone and call anybody.” He’s eager to be on either side of that phone call, he adds. “I’m happy to share that information and I want other YMCAs to be able to do the things that we’re doing successfully.”

Annual CEO meetings in each state, regional meetings, and meetings among Bridge Program cohorts also facilitate ongoing networking. “We introduce them via the certification process to other CEOs and to leaders who have been with the Y for a long time,” Radcliff says. Relationships build organically from there.

To make sure those networks keep growing and that the lessons of the competency model remain fresh, CEOs and other leaders are required to undergo recertification as Organizational Leaders every five years. “The recertification process is very much like something you’d find with any professional organization, like the certification for accountants or HR professionals,” Radcliff says. “It’s a combination of formal continuing education, real work experience and leadership roles, and facilitating learning across the movement.”

The combination contributes to the professional development of YMCA CEOs, but it’s how these skills are used to further the cause that’s most important. “We have a fundamental belief that each of us may develop as individual human beings, but none of us are fully developed unless he or she is part of a community,” Nicoll says. The Y’s leadership development program helps the organization build strong leaders, but just as important, those leaders build strong communities. “We are building and connecting people to community. That essentially is how we define Cause-Driven Leadership: it is thinking, acting, and communicating with the needs of our communities front and center.”

## Key Takeaways for Other Nonprofits

While the Y’s Leadership Certification program is specifically geared toward developing cause-driven leaders, it’s also the basis for some sage advice that other nonprofits should consider when creating their own leadership development efforts.

**Make new CEO leadership development a priority.**

Leadership development can quickly fall to the bottom of a CEO's to-do list when he or she is facing the challenges of beginning to run an organization. The Ys CEO Bridge Program deliberately spreads the training year to help CEOs meet their certification requirements.

**Establish specific goals for the short and long term.**

New leaders at the Y are required to take a Leadership Competency Assessment. The assessment evaluates their expertise in areas such as relationship-building, collaboration, and organizational management within the context of how these skills support their work as cause-driven leaders. In doing this, the Y helps new leaders establish short-term goals for smoothing their transitions, as well as longer-term goals for improving their skills, which in turn can benefit their organizations.

The Y also formalizes its leadership-development training with a certification process, followed by a recertification process every five years. This ensures that a leader has developed the competencies recommended in his or her initial Leadership Competency Assessment and that he or she is continuing on the path of Cause-Driven Leadership. In addition to setting professional expectations, formalized check-ins ensure that new leaders are being supported and meeting professional goals.

**Put working with a nonprofit board on the short list of training requirements.**

"Board leadership is a huge part of the CEO's job," says Radcliff. The emphasis here is on how to work with boards and get things done through a board.

**Make development experiential.**

"[New CEOs] have really found our approach to how we develop cause-driven leaders beneficial," says Rob Lowell, a Y-USA training manager. "Our approach isn't classroom-style, where you have to do everything exactly the same way. It's experiential. CEOs are getting real work done that benefits their development and the overall success of their YMCAs."

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