

Nov. “Leadership Matters” Addresses Best Practices of Effective Decision-Making Approach for Nonprofits

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Decision-making is often a difficult process for nonprofit organizations due to many factors, such as vague reporting structures, rapid organizational growth, and/or multiple decision makers, among others. In its current issue of “Leadership Matters,” Bridgestar, a nonprofit initiative of the Bridgespan Group dedicated to attracting, connecting, and supporting executive leaders for the sector, discusses best practices in implementing the RAPIDSM decision-making tool developed by Bain & Company, Inc. and utilized in Bridgespan nonprofit consulting engagements. The featured article, “RAPID Decision Making,” was adapted for “Leadership Matters” from the Bridgespan Group article, “RAPID Decision-Making: What it is, why we like it, and how to get the most out of it,” by Jon Huggett and Caitrin Moran.

“Using a decision-making tool such as RAPID can be extremely beneficial for nonprofit organizations,” said David Simms, managing partner, Bridgestar. “It enables leaders to gain clarity around the decision-making process, establishes accountability, and sets boundaries. By identifying and involving the right people in decision-making, organizations can drive better decisions and ultimately have more impact on achieving their goals.”

In the article, John Fitzgerald, executive director (ED) of the Texas High School Project, notes that “We were able to hire higher quality people for key senior management positions as a result of using RAPID. I was able to sit down with top-tier candidates and demonstrate the clear lines of authority and responsibility they would have, and it allayed concerns about the chain of command and their scope of decision-making working with me.”

RAPID is an acronym for the roles and activities involved in the decision-making process. The order of the letters is not important – “R-A-P-I-D” happens to be the easiest way to remember the roles. Following are the components of RAPID in the order they are likely to appear:

- **Recommender.** This is the person who initiates or drives the process and does the majority of the work to secure a decision. The recommender is the go-to person who ensures that others know their roles and keeps the process moving from beginning to end.
- **Input.** A person providing input must be consulted before a decision is made. While this individual provides valuable opinions, he or she does not have a vote or veto in the decision.
- **Agree with or approve.** This person is similar to individual who provides input, but has more power; an approver has a vote and a veto. The more people assigned to the “A” role, the more time and effort it takes for an organization to make a decision.
- **Decide.** The “D” has final authority and is the only person who can commit the organization to action, such as hiring someone, spending money or making a legally binding agreement. Generally the “D” is one person, but sometimes involves a group of people, for example, a board with a parliamentary voting structure.
- **Perform.** This is the person who implements the decision once it has been made. Often an individual who is a “P” is also and “I.” It is important that individuals expected to execute the decision are involved in the decision-making process or they may not have buy-in.

It can sometimes be difficult for organizations to implement RAPID if it exposes an existing process that is convoluted or imbalanced, or reveals a total lack of process. There are trade-offs and potential side effects involved in implementing RAPID that may make people uncomfortable and should be considered, including: switching ambiguity for transparency; making relationships more professional rather than familial; trading a highly participatory decision-making culture for a faster and more efficient one; and exposing how power flows through the organization, which may reveal that a culture touted for its participatory decision-making style may be more show than substance.

The “Leadership Matters” article presents guidelines for maximizing the benefit of RAPID, based on the experiences of

organizations that have implemented the tool.

- Make the case for the tool before you introduce it. Make sure everyone understands the RAPID process, roles, and benefits in enabling your organization to make decisions more effectively and efficiently.
- Carve off a few key decisions to start. By picking a handful of decisions causing the most pain, you are more likely to get support. Don't attempt more than a dozen decisions initially or the process may stall.
- Make a plan and pace yourself and your organization. Create a formal work plan for the RAPID process and solicit key points of view.
- Understand that many people will need to adjust to their assigned RAPID roles, and anticipate anxiety. The process of assigning roles is best done iteratively and expeditiously. Managing this process can be tricky; some people might feel excluded if they no longer have a prominent role in decision-making, while others may feel vulnerable because their power is exposed.
- Understand that RAPID is not a communications tool. It helps organizations diagnose and prescribe how to make decisions, but it does not tell them how to communicate these decisions.
- Once RAPID is being used, step back and review the whole. See if it all fits together. Does the new way of making decisions make sense? Do responsibilities and accountabilities match roles? Does the work balance fairly? Do you have buy-in from key leaders?

Each month, "Leadership Matters" selects a different theme about how to build and sustain effective nonprofit organizations. Available to Bridgestar members (or, for a complimentary subscription, please email subscribe@bridgestar.org), "Leadership Matters" is part of a robust portfolio of offerings that includes a job board and portals for nonprofit CFOs and COOs. Bridgestar has assisted many organizations in finding new leaders through its talent-matching services, which include executive recruiting and related advisory activities.

The current issue of "Leadership Matters" is available at: www.bridgestar.org/Resources/Newsletters/2007/November200.... For a complimentary subscription, please email subscribe@bridgestar.org. The full article from Bridgespan, "RAPID Decision-Making: What it is, why we like it, and how to get the most out of it," is available on the Bridgespan Group website at www.bridgespan.org.

About Bridgestar

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, is a nonprofit organization providing talent-matching services, content, and tools designed to help organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders. Bridgestar's goal is to attract, connect, and support senior talent, leading to greater organizational effectiveness and social impact.

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RAPID is a service mark of Bain & Company, Inc.

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