

## New CEO Ushers in High Performance Culture and a Focus on Measurable Impact



THE  
RHODE  
ISLAND  
FOUNDATION

### At a Glance

- **Year Founded:** 1916
- **Employees:** 42
- **Sector Focus:** Arts & culture, community development, education, environment, health and human services
- **Challenge:** New CEO seeks to create higher performance and an outcomes-oriented culture
- **Solution:** Talent Initiative from AchieveMission



**Talent Initiative made sense: we had come up with a strategy . . . and now we had to bring in the people piece to be successful. Changing the people was the biggest opportunity to change the performance and the culture.**

-- Jessica David, Vice President of Strategy and Public Affairs, The Rhode Island Foundation

### The Challenge

For years, the Rhode Island Foundation (RIF) had benefitted from its long-standing reputation in the community, a well-established endowment and a constant growth in assets. The Foundation had been doing good work, but there had been little pressure to evaluate their strategy or impact.

When the recession hit in 2008, the Rhode Island Foundation took a cut in funding. *"The organizations we were working with were drowning,"* described Jessica David, Vice President of Strategy and Public Affairs at RIF. *"We needed to become more impact oriented because there were fewer resources and more need."*

For newly hired CEO Neil Steinberg this was a great opportunity. *"We needed to create a new vision, redefine success and move away from our reactive and comfortable culture,"* recalled Steinberg. Under his leadership, the Foundation's board approved a new strategic plan in 2009 that prioritized resources onto the highest impact mission areas, shifted towards more proactive fundraising, emphasized leadership and advocacy, and increased the effort to measure impact.

It was through the strategic planning process that Steinberg began to see another major challenge – human capital: *"It became clear that we needed to focus next on making sure we had the right people and the right skill levels."*

### The Solution – Talent Initiative

David saw an opportunity to strengthen human capital with a new program called *for the organization programmatically and functionally and now we had to bring in the people piece to be successful.* In the summer of 2010, RIF was accepted into the first cohort of the Talent Initiative program.

AchieveMission Consultant Edith Buhs led the engagement: *"Working closely with the Foundation's staff, we came to understand the human capital management capabilities the Foundation would need to strengthen in order to achieve its new strategy and build the desired culture of high performance."*

While the findings resonated with David, it was the process that stood out. *"The process was really valuable for staff,"* David explained. *"It gave them a chance to weigh in and they felt very heard."* Added Buhs, *"It was essential for staff to understand why the changes were happening and to be part of defining the organization's future."*

After collaboratively creating the organization's new Strategic Human Capital Management Plan, the integrated Rhode Island Foundation-Talent Initiative team shifted into implementing a new Talent Review process. Through this process,

the Foundation's leadership evaluated each employee's performance and potential for advancement, considered successor talent pipelines for key roles, shifted towards succession-anchored development plans, and placed far greater emphasis on fit and potential in hiring. Described David, *"The Talent Reviews helped us create a shared understanding of what high performance meant here; it was a very powerful tool for helping us start to build the team we needed."*

## The Impact

The Rhode Island Foundation has made major strides forward in its human capital management capabilities and, as a result, in its capacity to achieve its mission. Steinberg praised the work, *"Talent Initiative raised our awareness and got us to address change management, cultural change and performance management."*

Steinberg and David trace a direct line from those early accomplishments to increased mission impact. For example, fundraising, the lifeblood of any community foundation has doubled under Steinberg's leadership. *"You have great people, you do better things and then all of a sudden that bar changes,"* said David. *"We're not just saying expectations are higher, we're demonstrating it."*

## Recommendations & Lessons Learned

David and Steinberg offer these insights to organizations facing similar challenges:

- 1. Investing in Human Capital works:** *"If you need to change your culture and increase your impact, there is no better lever than investing in your human capital."*
- 2. Change is hard:** *"Talent Initiative is not an easy process because change is not easy."*
- 3. Leadership engagement is essential:** *"This kind of work must be driven by a high-level leader at the organization who has the authority and responsibility of running with it."*
- 4. Organizations must be committed to change:** *"Human capital is about trying to create a new culture and move that culture through change management."*
- 5. Organizations need to act:** *"You can't just look at it academically, and not do anything. Organizations should not be afraid of making difficult choices when they know human capital problems exist."*

### Talent Initiative Impact

- ▶ Strategic Human Capital Management Plan
- ▶ Implementation of biannual talent review process
- ▶ Leadership more aligned around higher performance expectations
- ▶ Succession-driven development process implemented
- ▶ Focused hiring on better assessment of fit and potential
- ▶ Stronger team
- ▶ Improved organizational performance

**To learn more about Talent Initiative, visit:**

[www.achievemission.org/talentinitiative](http://www.achievemission.org/talentinitiative)