

Talent is the End Game

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In late October, some six months after we completed our work with the Talent Alliance, we sat down to talk with David Rittberg, Senior Program Officer, and Colleen Cruikshank, Program Officer, at the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. With the benefit of the passage of time and their individual and organizational reflection, David and Colleen offered their evolving thinking and learning about The Talent Alliance, and talent and leadership more broadly. The Talent Alliance is a cohort of three organizations – BBYO, Moishe House, and Hillel – formed to advance the recruitment, training and retention of top talent in each member organization and within the Jewish sector more broadly. AchieveMission partnered with Schusterman and the three organizations at the level of both cohort and organization, to identify the root causes hindering successful recruitment and make their talent acquisition practices as vital and effective as possible.

Here is what Colleen and David had to say.

What was the motivation behind forming the Talent Alliance?

CC: We get the CEOs of our grantee organizations together at an annual gathering. In 2014, the CEOs of BBYO, Moishe House, and Hillel started to talk about their retention challenges, and with time, the conversation expanded to recruitment and development. It emerged that they had similar challenges around these three areas, and they were inspired to do something about it together. So they came to us, and we said, “Yes, absolutely.” As a foundation, this is our dream situation – that our grantee partners will see an opportunity and work together to solve a common challenge.

DR: Our general mantra is collaboration and partnership. From where we sit, we can see the connection points all the time, or the opportunities for building the pipeline. The role we like to play is to help shore up what we call the “interstitial spaces.” These three organizations represent our most important distribution channels. And so the idea came to be.

What value did you think the member organizations would get from such a partnership?

DR: Our hope was that we would see efficiencies in the broadest sense of the word. We hoped that the three organizations would collectively solve the challenge because even though they are all unique organizations, different from each other, their needs are similar.

CC: We also saw it as an opportunity for the organizations to be thought leaders in the field. It is not just these three organizations who face this challenge, but the entire nonprofit sector, so this could also position BBYO, Moishe House, and Hillel as innovators piloting bold new strategies.

What was the need that led to the partnership with AchieveMission?

DR: We were at an inflection point, and wanted to take a big step toward attacking systemic problems and issues. We could have picked any of the broad categories around talent that our grantees mentioned, and knew that it would be critical to assess the root causes of some of these challenges. And that's how we found you. We had a hunch that many of these challenges are not technical challenges, that they are cultural or adaptive. We needed to deal with those at the beginning, and then move to the technical work.

CC: I really appreciated how this showed up in the ultimate work products for each of the three organizations – the final deliverable looked different for each – and that is different from how we had originally envisioned the project. And it was exactly what the organizations needed. You got there through the relationship building and trust you built with each organization.

DR: There is definitely a recognition at the Schusterman Foundation, and within the nonprofit world, that talent is the key to achieving our end games. We know that it is really hard to run an organization in the 21st century, given all the dynamics that people face on a day-to-day basis, without exceptional people with exceptional capabilities. The Schusterman Foundation prides itself on doing capacity building work, and traditionally, this has meant giving capacity building grants. But, of course, capacity building means a whole lot more than just money. We have landed on the idea that the best way to grow an organization's capacity is by enhancing and improving the talent they have.

CC: And to encourage the organizations to invest in and develop their own talent. Our work with you validated this.

DR: What was also validating in your work was that making movement on this issue has to be done in collaboration for a whole host of reasons, including that young people are more prone to change jobs and careers now than ever before. And so organizations are limited more than ever. This isn't unique in the Jewish communal space. It's true across the nonprofit sector. Therefore, we have much better chance of making headway collectively.

How did our work together help you to determine your next move with the Talent Alliance?

DR: It really highlighted the fact that these are communal challenges, and we must look at more communal ways to solve them. We recognized that to make a significant impact, the Talent Alliance will need to grow bigger its current membership. I imagine that we will reorient the alliance so it can move the needle on these sector-wide issues. And in doing so, it will also continue to help our grantees.

CC: We hope that it will continue to serve as a research and development lab; a space where we can pilot creative and innovative ideas collectively and collaboratively.

DR: We accomplished what we set out to do in our engagement with you. It has set the Alliance on a new course that will have an impact on the grantee organizations, the Schusterman Foundation, and the sector at large.