



The Kresge Foundation - AchieveMission Pilot to Strengthen Human Capital Practices in High-Potential Nonprofits

In early 2015 The Kresge Foundation partnered with AchieveMission in a pilot program to build the foundational elements of leadership development and human capital management in promising grantees. The core of the program, Talent Initiative, is a consulting, coaching and training engagement that helps organizations establish the leadership, culture and structure they need to implement their strategies and drive meaningful social change.

Six organizations were chosen for the pilot in a unique application and assessment process. For more information about AchieveMission and Talent Initiative, visit www.AchieveMission.org or call 800-834-0717 x700.

STARTING UP WITH AN HCM FOUNDATION

Achieving the Dream is a start-up with big plans to help community college students succeed. But what did ATD need to be successful?

An interview with Karen Stout
President and CEO, Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream (ATD) was established in 2004 by Founding Investor Lumina Foundation and seven founding partners as an initiative designed to help close achievement gaps and accelerate community college student success. In its first six years, ATD demonstrated that innovative, evidence-based community college programs and interventions can produce and sustain significant improvement in student engagement and levels of degree or certificate completion. So, in 2010, with the support of the founding community, Achieving the Dream's Managing Partner (MDC) spun off the initiative and created an independent nonprofit, Achieving the Dream, Inc., with its own dedicated staff and governing board. The organization now maintains an operating budget of more than \$16 million and employs 28 people.

"What incoming CEO wouldn't consider an HCM engagement a tremendous gift?"
Karen Stout

Karen Stout, the long-serving president of Montgomery County Community College (PA), an Achieving the Dream affiliate, was appointed the organization's second leader in February 2015 and started in the position on July 1. Prior to Karen's joining, the organization had completed a strategic plan and appeared well positioned to execute on the plan. "I had the unique opportunity to hear some of the planning discussion even before I officially joined Achieving the Dream," she says, "So I felt I would have a head start and was primed to take on the tasks ahead."

Enter The Kresge Foundation, a longtime supporter of ATD, with a unique invitation: to apply for a grant to build and implement the foundational elements of leadership development and human capital management in the organization, and to work with nonprofit consulting firm AchieveMission to identify the challenges and develop strategies to

engage, position and support the organization's next generation of leaders (see Insert). was chosen for a pilot grant along with five other high-potential nonprofits. ATD's engagement with AchieveMission, which employs the six-month consulting, coaching and training program Talent Initiative, began in March 2015.

We sat down with Karen to check in on Achieving the Dream's progress and to learn from their experience.

AM: Why was the Kresge invitation so compelling for you?

KS: The grant application and review process had begun before I arrived at Achieving the Dream. But what incoming CEO wouldn't consider a human capital management engagement a tremendous gift? I felt I would be in a very unique position to learn more about ATD and to work deeply with my colleagues in a way that would put us far ahead of the curve.

We were not selected for the original pilot class. We appealed to Kresge and the Foundation really wanted to support our leadership transition. So we are tremendously fortunate.

AM: What did you expect to work on?

KS: The expectation was that we would work on organization design corresponding to our strategic plan. Coaching for senior leadership, including me, was also included.

Basically, ATD is still very much in a start-up mode. We were incubated by a group of partner organizations with which we still have a wonderful relationship; nevertheless, we are now an independent nonprofit challenged to differentiate ourselves within the higher education reform movement and to build on our unique strengths and assets to serve the field effectively.

When I saw the first AchieveMission presentation I was really excited. I arrived from an academic institution and now I was going to be exposed to best practices in nonprofit management and learn more about the dynamics of organizational change ... it would be terrific for all of us.

“The original premise was: new plan, what org design? But the discovery process highlighted some fundamental disconnects.”

AM: And as the Talent Initiative process unfolded ...

KS: The original premise was: new plan, what org design? But the discovery process highlighted some fundamental disconnects within ATD. We didn't have strong alignment, at the staff or board levels, around what our new plan meant for the organization. The conversations catalyzed the realization that we needed to tune the plan and better align our organizational structure if we were going to deliver on it. For example, we needed to break down silos of work and communication within ATD. We also needed to agree on clear and measurable objectives for each of the strategic themes we've established.

AM: How did this all affect the plan?

KS: So I hear that this happens a fair amount: the senior team initially rejected the Achieve Mission survey data. It's understandable. It's challenging to live with your own story and then grapple with solutions. We had had a mirror held up to us, and we didn't necessarily want to accept what we saw in it. There was a lot of discomfort. We had to scrap our initial assumptions, our initial plan, and begin again. This is quite a challenge for a new leader—and it was for the AchieveMission team as well.

My goal was to help everyone decide that we were going to own [the facts] and move forward. The alignment included work on building internal cohesion. There were questions about trust; the need to find more productive ways to work together. It was very difficult to hear that staff felt the high level of disconnects that the survey revealed.

Our goals changed. We are now accountable for building a defined internal culture within the next three years, and for increasing our leadership team effectiveness. We're doing basics: how to structure meetings, how to give positive and constructive feedback, how to be candid and honest with each other. And we are all on board with that.

AM: What are the most important insights you're taking away from the work?

KS: Human capital management is complex and multi-dimensional; much more so than I thought and than what my team thought. At the same time that we need structure, we need parameters for how to be open and fluid.

As part of the Talent Initiative facilitation, we literally codified a whole year of our cycle of work. ATD had never done that type of prospective annual planning. We were able to identify and discuss many internal obstacles. It was extremely cathartic!

The flip chart content of that planning is on my office door. I look at it every day and so do other members of the team.

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AM: Who from ATD is involved?

KS: The leadership team formed our Council. We ended our engagement with two roadmaps: one to build our internal culture. A large culture team comprised of staff throughout the organization is now engaged in implementing that roadmap. The second roadmap is around improving leadership team effectiveness. We will begin that work in early 2016.

AM: We've mostly talked thus far about the engagement from the point of view of you as member of a working team. How are you feeling as the leader of Achieving the Dream?

KS: I care so much about higher education and want very much for our team to continue to be dedicated to the work. We are hiring many young professionals, just starting their careers. I want them to love serving in higher education as much as I do. I am committed to doing my part in developing our talent.

AM: Karen, do you have any advice for other nonprofit CEOs who are thinking about leadership and talent?

KS: Human capital management is an ongoing process, not just a chart or a roadmap for implementation. It involves both leadership and self-awareness. Be prepared to shift your thinking ... you learn new things about the organization and people that may require you to change course. Invest in owning the issues. And coaching, no matter what your position or where you are in your career, is an indispensable asset. Coaching allows you to reflect on what holds you back and what will propel you forward.