Postcards From the Edge

Paid sabbaticals help frazzled nonprofit workers—and their organizations—regroup

By Sandy Asrivatham

O ut of his three-month sabbatical to Machu Picchu, Peru, and the English countryside with his husband, and then came home to clean his closets and work on his garden.

Richard Zaldivar, founder and leader of an AIDS organization, spent his sabbatical in Spain and Portugal taking photographs, living with monks, and writing a blog. He then returned to handle some family difficulties in the aftermath of his parents’ deaths.

Kenny House, who oversees substance-abuse treatment services at a health-care charity, used his time off to visit Italy and Israel, play in several tennis tournaments, and begin recovering from a recent divorce.

All of these nonprofit leaders had a chance to take a break because foundations paid for the costs of taking a sabbatical—typically providing a salary for the executive director and his or her travel and study expenses.

Organizations are also sometimes given additional funds to compensate the other people who may take over the tasks handled by the leader.

Not only did time away give them a chance to decompress from the stress of their work schedules, as well as to renew their often badly neglected personal lives, but it also gave their organizations an unprecedented chance to groom talented staff members for leadership opportunities.

"When I came back to the office, people thought I was going to assume the responsibilities I had delegated to them while I was gone, and I didn’t," notes Mr. House, of Central Horizon Centers, in Wilmington, N.C., whose sabbatical was paid for by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Instead, he says, he was able to take on new roles and assignments. His sabbatical, he adds, enabled the group to allow a part-time psychologist, Pamela Morrison, to be groomed as a full-time director of its programs.

Ms. Morrison, who filled in for Mr. House during his absence and handled some of his former duties today, agrees that it would have been much harder to step up to a leadership role if her colleague had been around.

For a few weeks before the sabbatical, Ms. Morrison shadowed Mr. House during his weekday:

"Then he left, and he was really just gone. He sent e-mails and letters telling about his sabbatical experience, but never asked us about how things were going," Ms. Morrison says.

The opportunity for total self-reliance, she says, enabled her to trust her own judgment and make substantive decisions that she otherwise would have deferred to Mr. House.

"No Checking E-Mails" Nobody knows how many foundations and other donors offer sabbatical grants for nonprofit leaders, but the visibility and popularity of sabbaticals do seem to be on the rise, says Sandra J. Martinez, program director at the California Wellness Foundation, in Woodland Hills, Calif., a view buttressed by other grant makers.

Sabbatical programs typically provide funds to cover two or more months of paid leave for a group’s executive director, along with money or other assistance to help the organization operate in the leader’s absence.

The California Wellness Foundation, for example, offers nonprofit executives $30,000 for up to six months of leave, with up to $5,000 for professional development to help managers and staff members assume additional responsibilities.

Most foundations that offer sabbaticals encourage a complete communication break between the sabbatical recipient and his or her organization.

"We are straightforward and strict in our guidelines about not doing anything work-related: no checking e-mails, no professional development," says D.J. Vaughn, a fellow with the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, which pays $25,000 directly to its five sabbatical grantees per year to enable them to take three to six months away from the office, a program it has run since 1990. (More typically, grant makers provide money to the organization so it can continue to pay its executive a salary during the sabbatical.)

"This program was a brainchild of our trustees, who’ve seen how nonprofit leaders have been overworked and underpaid," says Mr. Vaughn. "We want to keep the talent within the nonprofit sector by giving people a chance to rest, and to take a look back at the work they’ve accomplished.”

"Confidence Builder" Sammye Pokryski, a program officer at the Rainmakers Foundation, in Anchorage, says her organization intentionally intended to fight excessive stress and burnout when it started offering a $30,000, 60- to 180-day sabbatical.

But Ms. Pokryski says she has seen unintended, positive results for the organizations that gave sabbaticals to their leaders.

"In numerous occasions, a junior executive or deputy director could step up in the role and kind of test the waters, and in a couple of cases, the organization itself realized how much talent they had that they weren’t using fully," Ms. Pokryski says. "It’s a real confidence builder to realize they have a well-run organization that can work without the CEO.”

Claire Poepe, executive director of the Dorfes Foundation, in Santa Monica, Calif., home to one of the oldest sabbatical programs, is now working to survey such efforts around the country.

The research is being conducted with the help of the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund, in San Francisco (which supports nonprofit leadership and governance development) and the Barr Foundation, in Boston (which offers a sabbatical) as part of its three-year fellowship program for nonprofit leaders in the field of education.

"We’d like to create a compendium of these programs, asking how long they’ve been in existence, how many years a year they’re making, how many they’ve made since inception, whether they award funds by application or nomination, and so on,” she says.

The basic survey, Ms. Poepe says, will be followed by an evaluation that looks at how well those programs are achieving not just the primary goal of supporting nonprofit leaders, but also the equally important mission of developing leadership among the rest of the staff members.

Work on the project is set to begin this summer, with the analysis of the data beginning in early fall, Ms. Poepe says. She hopes to end...
Research Sabbatical Gifts Give Charity Leaders Time to Pursue Fresh Ideas

Julian Huerta says taking months off from his job at Foundation Communities, an Austin, Tex., charity that develops low-cost housing and provides services to homeless families, was "being away for long periods of time doesn’t seem worth it," he says. "The work pales up and I’m more stressed when I return."

But Mr. Huerta, whose group’s director of community services, did benefit from a shorter break, one that allowed him to escape the demands of the office but also acquire knowledge to help his charity carry out its mission more effectively.

He participated in a sabbatical research program offered by the Humildities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. The program pays nonprofit executives to take up to 160 hours of paid time off. The grant recipients are supposed to use the time off to pursue job-related ideas and questions too expansive to be dealt with during the regular work week.

"My research project was to look at best practices across the country for providing housing and supportive services for the homeless. I also had to decide whether the information could be applicable to Austin and our organization," Mr. Huerta says.

With a grant of $8,000, he was able to take a separate week-long trip to Seattle and New York to visit and interview groups that provide housing and services to homeless people there. In addition, for three months, Mr. Huerta spent Fridays at the university library, conducting further research on how other organizations help homeless families. Along the way, he received guidance from two university faculty advisers, one an architect and another a social worker.

Although, Mr. Huerta says, the efforts to integrate housing and other programs are still "in the wings" he believes that his work will ultimately help Foundation Communities refresh its approach to helping its clients.

Diane Takvorian and her husband, Robert Bray, trekked to Machu Picchu, in Peru, as part of her sabbatical from her job as leader of the Environmental Health Coalition.

In fact, she says, although she did stay out of the office and out of town for much of her sabbatical, she neglected to delegate one responsibility: training a new employee. "It turned out to be more work than it should have been. I was coming in once every two weeks," Ms. Takvorian says.

She and the organization also neglected to plan other people’s vacations during her absence; at one point, when two key people were out of the office at the same time, a high-profile crisis landed back in her lap.

Given these interruptions, at the grant maker’s behest after her sabbatical, Ms. Takvorian joked about wanting to do it all over.

"That sense of No one is indispensable, I knew intellectually, but now I know it more on an emotional level," she says.

Sabbatical grant makers emphasize that planning is key to ensuring a successful break.

"Because the Raamsoen Foundation has required each recipient, as well as the interim directors and one or two board members, to plan budget and expense issues, staffing and delegation, and guidelines for how much or how little sabbatical recipients will communicate with the office during the time away."

The program is run with the help of the Foraker Group, a nonprofit-management consultant organization in Anchorage, which aids organizations whose leaders or other staff members have taken Raamsoen’s sabbatical grant.

The foundation also insists on a backup plan in case the interim director must leave his or her post for any reason, Ms. Pokrzyki adds: "Unexpected things happen."

In many cases, we are hearing back from grantees that their research sabbaticals have enabled significant changes in the work they do," Ms. Young notes. She notes, for instance, that a recipient used her time off to write a plan to help other loca- lities copy an after-school program she founded in Austin; new versions of her program have been started in other Texas cities.

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Grantees have included a legal-aid lawyer, who used his research to help develop a Spanish- language course for his peers working with Spanish-speaking clients and an expert in sexual assault prevention, who quantified the financial consequences of the crime on the state as a way to spur public awareness.

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Sabbatical grant makers provide a good balance, enabling leaders to take time away from the office but still to contribute strongly to the organization and its long-term viability.

—Sandy Asvathiam

"It’s a delicate dance, We don’t want to promote people before their positions, but this process very naturally broaches the conversation."