

- **DOING GOOD**

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS: TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

How a business background helped set 2 NGO chiefs up for success

By *Kelli Rogers* 04 March 2014



Both Rodney Ferguson, CEO of Winrock International, and Simon Cooke, CEO of Marie Stopes International, have drawn on their strong business backgrounds to take on leadership roles in international development. Photo by: Winrock International / Marie Stopes International

It's always different being the person who has to execute a strategic plan versus someone who just helps develop it, said Rodney Ferguson, CEO of Winrock International, a nongovernmental organization that works with people in the United States and around the world to increase economic opportunity and sustain natural resources.

"When I was a consultant, my job was to generate the ideas and interesting tactics, but at the end of day you're not responsible for executing on the part of your clients," explained Ferguson, who spent 20 years as a communications and strategy consultant for nonprofits before stepping into the role of Winrock's CEO in March 2013.

While CEO wasn't a title that had previously appeared beside his name, Ferguson traces his ability to step successfully into the role to his background in communications and business strategy.

Simon Cooke, CEO of Marie Stopes International, a leading provider of sexual and reproductive health care services, also made the leap to his current role from the private sector, from which he brought more than 20 years of international management, marketing and sales experience.

"It's very logical," Cooke said of a private-to-public sector transition, noting that the skills business-minded professionals possess are exactly what is often lacking in the development sector.

"Most people coming from the commercial sector have financial acumen and a focus on results and delivery," he said.

And in a sector that must increasingly justify just how it uses its money, professionals from the private sector are perfectly placed to bring those skills into the international aid environment.

A useful background: Strategy and communications

The development world is changing fast and all development organizations — be they domestic or international — have to be confident in the strategy they're going to adopt going forward, as well as be able to articulate it. Beyond strategy and delivery, every organization needs to communicate the work it is doing. This is especially true for organizations engaged in development, since they must be accountable to their donors, constituents, governments and the public — a wider group of people than most private companies have to deal with.

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Winrock is no different, Ferguson said, and it's his job to balance the focus on strategic direction with maintaining current project implementation, which is also the perfect chance for him to draw on his past experience in marketing and communications.

"It seemed to me that whatever direction Winrock and other nonprofits in our space go toward, communications is going to be crucial to helping ensure that that strategy is successful," he said, noting that boards of international development organizations understand the future is going to require NGOs that can tell their story well and align their story to their strategy.

People from the communications, journalism or marketing industries are very good at formulating and telling stories and are often very quick studies, said Ferguson, who himself began his career as a journalist.

“The best ones have an insatiable curiosity and an uncontrollable urge to engage in interesting work and on interesting projects,” he said. “You combine that with the quick study element and you’ve got folks that aren’t afraid to throw themselves in and work to try and come up with innovative solutions.”

Again, Ferguson found that his experience, while not gained in a traditional development environment, was also very applicable. In his former position, he was involved with a number of international development and international private sector projects.

“It’s a slightly different context, but not as different as you might imagine,” Ferguson said. “You’re tasked with developing and executing projects and building off that success.”

Even experience completely outside the realm isn’t all that different, noted Cooke, who previously worked for Procter & Gamble and served as CEO of SuperMax, a personal care product marketing organization based in the Middle East, prior to joining MSI.

“To be honest, people keep telling me, ‘It must be very different.’ But I’m struggling to find the difference. The knowledge I’ve got is very useful,” Cooke said.

Marketing, for instance, for the sake of being able to improve income flow and direction of money and appealing to clients, are all huge pieces of a large international NGO. And because MSI oversees the handling of millions of dollars of products that go through logistics and procurement, Cooke’s acquired skills in cross-handling and efficiency come into play as well.

Inspiration and pressure

Both Cooke and Ferguson noted that a particular interest in the mission of their organization’s work is what drew them away from the private sector and into development in the first place, and this drive to do good is another crucial factor in success as a leader of an international NGO.

“It’s very inspiring,” Cooke said of his current work, adding that he’s excited about a vision of long-term growth and opportunity to serve women.

“You have to commit to the cause and mission,” he said. “If it’s the marriage of those skills you’ve honed elsewhere with a commitment to the mission, that’s a great combination.”

The most important difference between his past roles and his current position with MSI, Cooke said, is that the end result of what he does and the service delivery to women is so impactful.

“I come from a business that made toilet cleaners and air fresheners. But with MSI, you can see results of your work very tangibly and you can talk to the people you’ve helped,” said Cooke, who recently returned from a trip to Jaipur and Hyderabad, India, where he met with women who benefit from MSI’s many sexual and reproductive health care services.

According to both men, the challenge — more than adapting to a new role and industry — is building on the work of extremely successful CEOs past.

“The pressure comes from within,” Cooke said. “It’s the desire to keep the strong growth.”

MSI was successful under its former CEO, Cooke said, so the idea of bringing someone in from the commercial was to sustain that sustainability.

Winrock was also already a very successful organization before he arrived, Ferguson said, so building on success is often a harder job than building on failure.

Moving forward

The ability to listen is a must in order to be successful in the leap from one discipline to an executive position in another, like a nonprofit organization.

“Listen a lot,” Ferguson said. “Be as open to listening as you can, particularly as you are coming to know the organization.”

And it’s not only important to listen, but to learn what to listen for.

“There are a lot of people who are eager to share their point of view with you, so seek out those that maybe aren’t as comfortable sharing their point of view and create opportunities for them,” Ferguson said.

Holding lunch meetings where everyone is invited to participate or utilizing anonymous internal surveys are good ways to open lines of communication, he said.

Often, Cooke said, private sector professionals assume there’s resistance on the NGO side, or that’s it’s completely different because it’s mission-driven, but that’s not the case, and it’s “the wrong way to think.”

“There are people who are fantastic in the field and do incredible work,” he said. “There’s also people who need to manage other aspects of those doing that great work in the field, and people who have the skills to manage a very large international organization altogether.”

The work, though, is never ending. In any enterprise, it’s important to build on success while also creating new opportunities for the organization and country programs.

“It’s more about moving ahead and growing sustainably than just growing for the sake of being big,” Cooke said. “If you want to be all things to all people and can do that successfully, good for you, but as someone coming from sales and marketing, I know how hard it is to try to appeal to broad group.”

In 2012, MSI served 5.6 million people and is on track to meet the pledge they made in 2012 of reaching 20 million women by 2020.

And you have to embrace creativity for a nonprofit like Winrock, Ferguson said, which means looking at opportunities to do more work with the corporate sector and more work directly with foundations or private donors.

Winrock is seeing growth opportunity in economic development and sustainable food networks in the United States, and Ferguson looks forward to more bold thinking to further success in their Farmer-to-Farmer program in Myanmar as well as growth in their energy portfolio in Southeast Asia.

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