



CLIENT CASE STUDY SERIES, No. 2

Literacy Action, Inc.

In just over a year, Blaze helped Literacy Action, Inc. (LAI) pivot from impact-threatening stagnation to energized redirection and growth. Below, LAI's current and previous board chair share how their organization worked through unprecedented challenges to new generation excellence and growth.

Client Snapshot

LENGTH OF ENGAGEMENT: April 2019-April 2020, with the new Executive Director onboarded in April 2020

LOCATION: Atlanta GA

SERVICE AREA: Greater Atlanta

FOUNDED: June 1968

FOCUS: Adult Literacy and Workforce Readiness

MISSION: To build better futures for undereducated adults by teaching literacy, life and work skills that empower them to reach their highest potential

SIZE: 12 staff, with a budget of approximately \$1.6M

Blaze provided the following services:

- Interim Executive Leadership
- Executive Search
- Implementation of New 3-Year Strategic Plan

Highlights:

- Built on two core objectives of the newly-approved strategic plan—focusing on organizational restructuring and developing business models
- Led executive search process from job description revisions all the way through final interviews and onboarding at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worked with the search committee to ensure board buy-in and transparency at every step of the process.
- Worked with and coached senior team members and specialists, developing opportunities for growth and leadership development
- Translated strategic objectives into an actionable investment plan and communicated strategic direction to key stakeholders and funders

In 2018, the then-Executive Director of LAI began the major undertaking of commissioning and laying out a robust three year strategic plan. The plan was solid and right in all of the best ways, but presented a glaring new truth—implementation of this plan would require top-to-bottom transformational change.

After only one year in the job, the new leader started to evaluate if this next chapter of the organization was one that she could helm.

One revelation led to another. Staff and board members found the new plan simple in its construction but intimidating in its broad community mandates and began to question internal capacity. Funders, recognizing the need for evolution, were hesitant to fund such an undertaking. And within a few months, it became clear to the board that the current executive director that things had to change.

“We had an extraordinary plan and nobody to implement it,” recalls Addison Meriwether, former Board Chair after the resignation of the last executive director who swiftly realized that there were too many variables for her to remain in the equation.

With what seemed to be a perfect storm brewing, the board decided to take a sober look at where they were versus where they needed to be. “We didn’t know it at the time, but our piecemeal revelations pointed at what was quickly becoming a full overhaul of the organization,” adds current board chair, Blake McDaniel.

Choosing Blaze

With challenges looming, the organization knew that addressing each one would

require a unique skill set—competent, capable, and comfortable with change; the journey started with bringing in an external interim leader to champion this change.

“I had serious conversations with three candidates,” shares Meriwether, “one of which was Val Porter Cook of Blaze. Once the other two candidates found out we were talking to Val, they each said ‘I’m not the right person for this work; Val is,’ and bowed out of consideration for the role. That spoke volumes to me.”

Val, with years of experience leading some of Atlanta’s most distinctive non-profit organizations, came to LAI and was very clear that she couldn’t be an “interim babysitter”; Blaze intended to take on the tall order of searching for a new full-time Executive Director and was eager to look into and begin implementing the new strategic plan, as well. And so, the work began.

“I jokingly call [Val] Dr. Cook. She’s a cross between a doctor with a bedside manner, a professor in the classroom, and a psychologist who can hear what’s going on, unpack it, and make a statement.”

-Addison Meriwether, Former Board Chair

“Within three months, you would’ve thought Val had been in that job for years just in the way that she immersed herself in the mission and the organization,” Meriwether remembers. “As an interim, it’s hard to come in and make an impact, knowing that you’re leaving and knowing that everybody else in the room knows you’re going to leave in short order.”

However, Val's work as interim director progressed with such speed and effectiveness, the organization requested to extend her engagement for an additional six months.

"An exit would have been more of a disruption of the mending that was taking place." Meriwether adds, "I jokingly call her Dr. Cook. She's a cross between a doctor with a bedside manner, a professor in the classroom, and a psychologist who can hear what's going on, unpackage it, and make a statement."

One important piece to consider [in leadership transition] is the timeline of change. An organization in crisis wants to see change now, and results yesterday. **But rushing a process prematurely often causes more issues than not.**

Although there were initially some staff and board trepidations—as is common at the onset of change—Val came in fully committed. McDaniel describes her as "demanding in all of the right ways. We needed that energy!" This commitment and inclusion led to strong outcomes, including her ability to identify specific strengths in a number of employees, and utilize them to their fullest capabilities.

Let The Search Begin

With work on the strategic plan well underway, the organization was ready to launch into the executive search process for a permanent Executive Director. Enter Elyse

Klova, Blaze's second half.

"She owned the executive search, and did an incredible job that won the board's confidence early on," Meriwether continues. Bringing her own unique strategy and scoring matrix, Elyse narrowed the list from 300 candidates to one excellent fit, despite interruption by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We never once questioned how she was doing things or how she arrived at a decision. Elyse created such a professional, visible process that that left no room for ambiguity. Thorough and effective. Nuanced and logical. Not pushy, but rather very consultative. She was so good, in fact, that the head of a large talent management corporation who serves on our board wanted to hire her away!"

Reflecting on Progress

Reflecting on successful outcomes is easy, but growth especially occurs when we can recall the challenges and assess how those successes became attainable. When asked to reflect on that period for the organization to define the central challenge of change, both past and present board chairs offered sage truths:

"Anybody can talk about change," says Meriwether. "You can plan for change, hypothesize about change, and more. But implementation is the hardest part in any situation, because everybody is adverse to change."

McDaniel shares "We knew that things were not right internally, but a lack of clarity in specifics prevented us from moving forward. We needed to progress as an organization, rather than merely continuing—the latter being what happens when you merely treat symptoms that would not otherwise go away. Blaze was very effective in coming in and providing both of those."

One important piece to consider is the timeline of change. An organization in crisis wants to see change now, and results yesterday. But rushing a process prematurely often causes more issues than not. Meriwether:

“I would not have made the assumption that we would have needed Blaze for a whole year. Some board members pushed back on extending, feeling that it was more important to fill the role sooner than not. But had we gone and hired an executive director sooner, I don’t think we would have the ED that we have now.”

“When we hired the previous ED, we did so having never stopped and studied the organization that we were asking her to lead. In the end, we offered her a job that we weren’t really aware of; there was so much that we needed to assess. When that ED resigned, we pledged that, despite the state of the organization, we couldn’t afford to rush this. We committed to stop and not sprint into a new search to fill a seat. Instead, we would look at the organization, assess it, and make good decisions. Blaze helped us to honor that commitment to the organization, and essentially, our mission.”

Nonprofits often march directly to the drum of external funding, and the organization could have used their funds in any number of ways aside from working with a change management consultancy. So when asked why they decided to march in a different direction, Meriwether’s answer was simple.

“Why’d we do it? That’s easy—because the organization would no longer exist. We needed more than an old, good name to survive; we needed outcomes, results and impact. And without a new plan in place, we couldn’t structure ourselves to sufficiently communicate

our position, or our impact throughout the community in a way that funders or supporters could identify.”

Hindsight is 20/20, so when considering what he would offer to his fellow board members some six months before the engagement began, McDaniel offers this:

“I’d tell the board and myself to start imagining what conceivably would be the ideal outcome and position for the organization. Change is difficult—especially in a time of turmoil. So it would have been helpful to look at what needed to change during a time of more stability. Maybe we would have been able to chart a path or at least identify a destination that would have been even more helpful in the engagement with Blaze. We had some idea of where we wanted to go, but I think with a clear view of that at the beginning, Val might have been even more efficient at getting us there.

Today, our outlook based on the influence of Val and Elyse on the organization is incredibly positive. I think unequivocally we have a better view of what our challenges are now than we had before the engagement. Not only do we have a better view of what the challenges are, but Val left us with a pretty good roadmap of how to go about addressing those.”

Change is inevitable. But with strategic change management provided by Blaze Consulting, Val and Elyse enabled LAI to ride out the inevitable like pros and arrive on new shores.



Is your organization facing a leadership transition? Let Blaze support you.

With almost 40 years' combined experience in the social sector, Blaze Leadership Development offers wraparound leadership transition services to provide mission-driven organizations with the love and support they need at a critical time. We work with board and staff to evaluate and fill interim needs, conduct a strategic and transparent executive search, and provide leadership coaching to ensure a smooth onboarding experience. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you think we can be of service.

You can email Val and Elyse anytime at hello@blazeleadership.co.