

From Goldman Sachs to the San Diego Fire Department: Lessons Learned of the Journey

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Summary

With our publication's recent expansion, new readers (including for-profit executives who are considering switching careers to social enterprises) are looking to the SIJ for career insights. In this issue, we share the personal journey of Phil Black, a fast-tracked Harvard MBA who had to weigh a number of compelling, often conflicting variables in his career decision-making process.

With nonprofit employment and total annual wages' steady growth each year from 2007 through 2012, even during the 2007–09 recession, the sector continues to attract new candidates.¹ Ask any Baby Boomer about a potential encore career, and a common response is, "after I retire from my current job, I'd like to give back and join a nonprofit." But the key word is after, since financial obligations like mortgages, college tuition and 401k savings often take priority. So, what spurs an individual to plunge into a nonprofit before these other responsibilities are addressed? In this article, Phil Black,² of the San Diego

Fire Department and a 2002 graduate of the Harvard Business School (HBS), shares his personal journey.

Q. A graduate from Yale and the Harvard Business School, a Navy Seal, and an investment banker with Goldman Sachs; somehow most people would assume that the next logical step would be with a private equity firm or a C-Suite position at a Fortune 500 company. What motivated you to become a fire fighter?

A. A number of factors weighed into the equation. A long-term passion for service was catalyzed by the 9/11 tragedy; but frankly it was a struggle since financial concerns (new ones like a growing family at the time with the birth of twin sons and old ones like remaining debt from B-school) weighed on me. Also at the time, like many of my peers, I was on an achievement kick, trying to earn entrance and continuous success at some of the most coveted global organizations.

Frankly, it was a typical Type-A and coveted track. I had worked at Goldman and returned there, and I could see how it could provide a very comfortable lifestyle for my entire family. Still, after one particularly long day at the office, my wife's keen observation and her stated words of support that I should pursue what I really wanted in life enabled me to convert from an achievement to a fulfillment kick. By fulfillment, it means that while I do recognize what I've currently given up, like the \$40 million

that one of my HBS classmates has in his savings accounts, it's realizing that what I pursue each day brings value to those who I serve as well as my family and me.

Q. How were you able to convince the San Diego Fire Department to consider hiring you?

A. If you thought getting into Yale or HBS was challenging, the admittance rate for some fire departments is even less. And, yes, the career advice that your Bridgespan Group colleague once shared around how social enterprise entities are looking for candidates who value mission over money does indeed ring true. Moreover, just as I had been securing the typical tracked experiences for an HBS graduate in the private sector, my competition had been investing years for their candidacy as fire fighters. So the lessons learned as a Navy Seal around humility and the willingness to start from ground zero helped me to gain the right mindset and invest time to take courses and secure experiences so that I would be considered a competitive candidate, as well. Also, during the interviews, I had to explain how, despite having learned a number of situational leadership experiences in prior work assignments, if they considered me, I would not come in guns blazing with my private sector expertise. Rather, I would invest the time to earn the right to engage and propose ideas that were applicable to this very different work environment.

Q. Given the education and mentoring that you

received at some of the world's premier training grounds, what two leadership practices have you been able to effectively apply in your role as a fire fighter?

A. First, preparation is crucial since the old adage of time means money is now amplified when time means saving lives. We have a lot of downtime when we are not on actual fire or medical responses, but that doesn't mean we sit around all day. We are in constant preparation mode to ensure that we are ready to answer the call when it comes. There are endless skills and capabilities that we are responsible for, and preparation is key to keep us well-tuned.

Second, perseverance is another trait that I strive to maintain and it's a key leadership competency that defines many in my relatively new profession. After all, even with vigilant preparation, there are those unfortunate situations which do occur, and being able to bounce back afterwards is a true crucible for all of us.

References

1. "Nonprofits in America: new research data on employment, wages, and establishments," Bureau of Labor Statistics (February 2016),

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2016/article/nonprofits-in-america.htm>.

2. Phil Black, LinkedIn Profile Page, accessed October 10, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/philipablack>.

Michael Wong has over 25 years of experience working directly for Apple, AstraZeneca, IBM, and Merck. His insights have been shared in the Harvard Business Review and MIT Sloan Management Review.