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Ontario Trillium Foundation's Robin Cardozo is creating healthy communities

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Globe and Mail Update

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Robin Cardozo is chief executive officer of the Ontario Trillium Foundation. He has held the role since 1999.

What's your background and education?

I'm a chartered accountant by training. I trained in Britain and came to Canada in the 1970s. I worked in CA firms and in the financial services industry before moving over to the not-for-profit sector in the late 1980s.

How did you get to your position?

I leveraged my CA training and was fortunate to get the position of director of finance at the United Way of Greater Toronto, so that allowed me to work in accounting but also to be working for a major charitable organization. I was able to get experience in a number of other areas of the organization, working in the community, and that experience positioned me to eventually become the CEO of the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

What's the best part of your job?

Definitely the people I get to work with, the incredible professional staff at the foundation, the very committed volunteers, and the people I meet in the community. I meet an incredible number of bright, committed, creative people.

What's the worst part of your job?

We have this incredible opportunity that the government has given us to make grants to support important work that happens in Ontario, but the demand for the funds that we have far exceeds the funds available, so we often have to say no to people who have a good idea and believe passionately in what they're doing. It is difficult explaining to people why they were not successful.

What are your strengths?

My ability to build mutually trusting relationships with the people I work with, with the staff, the volunteers, the community partners and the people in government. Another strength would be that I work hard to think strategically about the long term. Every decision we make may initially be for a short-term reason but always has a long-term impact.

What are your weaknesses?

I take an optimistic and trusting approach to every relationship, and some people are not necessarily of that same perspective. Everyone in the world is not an optimist, so I have to learn how to work with people who may not have that perspective on relationships and on our work.

What has been your best career move?

Without question it was getting the job at United Way because that gave me an opening into the not-for-profit sector. It allowed me to leverage my professional background to get into the sector, and that led to a wonderful decade at United Way and, in turn, a wonderful decade at the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

What has been your worst career move?

Earlier in my career, I got involved in publishing a travel newsletter that I thought would be a fun hobby, something to do on the side, because I love travel and I love writing. But I learned that you can't really do something like that on the side. It ended up taking way too much time and not providing enough reward or satisfaction.

What's your next big job goal?

Whatever I do for the balance of my career, I hope that I'll have the ability to continue to learn and to use those learnings to contribute to healthy communities in Canada.

What's your best advice?

I often talk to people who are mid-career in the corporate sector who are looking to move into the not-for-profit sector. Sometimes I find that they have the right motive but they don't have a full appreciation of how complex the sector is. My advice to them is two things: No. 1, look for ways to leverage their professional skills to help them get into the not-for-profit sector. No. 2, develop a long-term plan. If you develop a three- to five-year plan, and part of that plan would be to get on not-for-profit boards and working committees, getting experience of various aspects of the not-for-profit sector as a volunteer, that experience would help to leverage one into a paid position.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Dianne Nice is The Globe and Mail's Careers & Workplace Web Editor.

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