

# Nonprofit Leadership: Innovating Around the Mission

## A Witt/Kieffer Case Study

At **Perkins**, Dave Power is leveraging a love of the organization and a corporate background to push the boundaries of what an already-successful nonprofit can achieve.

**WITT / KIEFFER**  
*Leaders Connecting Leaders*

## Organization:

Perkins

## Leader:

Dave Power,  
President and CEO

## Challenge:

Help an established,  
successful organization get  
creative about growth and  
greater impact

## Solution:

Create greater reach and  
value by focusing on unmet  
customer needs

### Innovation around the Mission

In 2013 when the recruitment began for a new president and CEO for Perkins – known best as the parent organization for the Perkins School for the Blind – Dave Power did not consider himself a candidate. Power sat on the Perkins board, knew the organization intimately, but assumed he wasn't the right fit. He had a corporate background, having spent 25 years in a variety of private-sector executive roles: CEO of a startup, chief marketing officer of a public information security company, general manager of a 160-person division of a technology company. He had also spent a decade as a venture capitalist, investing in and advising the management teams of fast-growing organizations on how to cope with change.

Power even wrote a book on corporate growth strategy, *The Curve Ahead: Discovering the Path to Unlimited Growth*. So he hardly seemed like the right fit to run a one of the most recognizable mission-driven nonprofits on the East Coast. "Unlimited growth" was the furthest thing from Perkins' guiding principle.



Dave Power  
President and CEO,  
Perkins

And yet Perkins was indeed looking for someone with Power's qualifications. "When I saw the criteria that the committee had put together, I realized that they were actually looking for someone like me," he says. The board was not looking for a "school leader"—it had that already in Superintendent Dorinda Rife, who oversaw management of the Watertown, Massachusetts campus and Perkins' educational programs.

The job was more about taking the organization to its next level (defined broadly), something that Power was quite familiar with from his past experiences. "The position description focused on strategy, organizational leadership, understanding of technology, investments in new products and services," Power notes. "Those were all things I had been doing all of my career."

Another key prerequisite was a spirit of innovation, which Power had exhibited for many years. "I had several people ask me, 'Why aren't you thinking about this role?'" he recalls.

## A Perkins Parent

Unknown to many outsiders, Perkins is much more than a school for individuals who are blind, and deafblind, including those with additional disabilities. It is comprised of five operating groups, the school being just one. It is also involved in online education, materials publishing, international partnering and lobbying, and even the manufacturing of braille devices.

The president and CEO is charged with integrating the five segments under one brand (the term "One Perkins" is used often) and continuing to build a strong brand nationally and internationally. It was a role with both operational and strategic elements that Power could appreciate and embrace. So he threw his hat into the ring.

There was one other significant factor that drew Power to pursue the president and CEO position. It was what introduced him to Perkins more than 25 years ago: his son David is deafblind and had matriculated at Perkins for his entire schooling, graduating in 2009. With support, David is now an active member of his community.

As a "Perkins parent," Power had seen first-hand over many years the incredible difference that Perkins was making in the lives of students, parents, and other constituents. He didn't need to be sold on the mission—he got it.

Being a Perkins parent drew Power to the organization's board, and now it was one reason he gravitated towards the top job there. "There's a perspective I got from being [David's] dad," Power says. "He's out there in the real world now, and everything that you can do for students helps prepare them for that transition to adult living. And everything you can do for parents is very helpful as well. Today I'm still sharing ideas and insights with other Perkins parents."

## The Perkins Portfolio

Perkins' five divisions include:

- Perkins School for the Blind
- Perkins Solutions (including assistive technology and consulting)
- Perkins Library
- Perkins eLearning
- Perkins International (bringing education to all visually impaired children in developing countries)

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Being David's dad gives Power additional motivation, but does it give him unique insight as a leader? “One perspective I bring to the table that is somewhat of a difference culturally for Perkins is that I view the parent as a customer,” he says. “That involves more listening to and paying attention to changing needs of parents, both those who have kids in the school and those whose students have graduated and are transitioning into adult life. The customer orientation towards the parent is ingrained in me from having been a [Perkins] parent.”

## Serving the Customer

Other nonprofit educational institutions might bristle at talk of parents—and school districts—as *customers*, but Power says his ideas have been well-received thus far. “It's a light that I shine on things,” he says. Especially with five elements to the Perkins portfolio, understanding customers in each of those areas is critical for staying relevant and innovating. An orientation to customers has its roots in the private sector but is a natural fit for nonprofits as well, Power believes.

“What applies across the board is to stay relevant, and that means staying in touch with the changing needs of those you serve,” he says. “This is true for both the private and public sector. If you're a private business and you're losing touch with your customers or are complacent about a product, your business will stop growing. And if you're a non-profit and you have yesterday's view of what your mission is, you're going to lose impact and donor support. Both types of organizations need to understand the changing needs of those they serve and to innovate in order to stay relevant.”

The fundamental difference between the two sectors, of course, is that private companies have revenue growth as their number one priority. With nonprofits that priority is fulfilling the mission, however the impact of that mission may be measured.

For this reason, Power doesn't speak about growing Perkins revenues. “I talk about expanding our impact as we help children and young adults who are visually impaired— around the world—to realize their potential as adults,” he says. Innovation is one way to accelerate this impact. “Innovation comes because you uncover unmet needs of customers,” Power says. “You get out of the building, get off your campus and find out what's out there that's new. For us that includes talking with students, teachers, school systems, and it also means donors. If you're current, you know how to be innovative and where to find innovation.” As an illustration, Perkins is helping to rethink what literacy means for blind, deaf-blind, and multiply disabled individuals—including but not limited to braille. It is doing field research on all of the ways that people with impaired vision read, write and communicate. “We've reframed the problem statement in a way that's very refreshing and there's a lot of excitement around this project,” he says.

Perkins is also reimagining its curricula and teaching methods around current ideas of how to better prepare students for independent, productive living beyond their years at Perkins. Engaging businesses to open doors to employment for graduates, giving young adults the tools they need to live as independently as possible, and helping parents understand their options is all part of Power's plan to use innovation to expand its missionary impact.

## The Right Fit, the Right Time

Once Power decided to become a candidate for the position, he was viewed as viable and ultimately was selected by the search committee. Power calls his new job "the most important role" that he's had in his career. "The impact of what a president at Perkins can do, if you get it right, is enormous," he says. It's an opportunity to help visually impaired students and their families lead more productive lives, and to educate society as well. There is a "tangible value" with a role like this that is hard to replicate in a corporate setting, Power says.

That said, there are few jobs in the not-for-profit sector that Power believes would be a natural fit. He had a clear affinity for Perkins and also knew that it was financially stable with a strong management team and board already in place.

And he is at a point in his career at which leading a major nonprofit makes sense, especially given the breadth of his experiences. "Experience makes you better at things like aligning and leading organizations, crafting and getting the message out, searching for opportunities for innovation in the way that you do things, making investments in the future," he says. "I'm better prepared now than I would have been at any other time in my life."

Dave Power is evidence that leadership has many components. When those pieces fit together at the right place and time, the leader, his/her organization, its "customers," and the mission all benefit.

"I'm better prepared now than I would have been at any other time in my life."

### More about Dave Power

- Power has worked for Sun Microsystems, RSA Security, Novera Software, Mercator Software, and Fidelity Ventures, plus his own consulting firm, Power Strategy.
- He earned engineering degrees at Tufts University and an MBA at Stanford.
- He has taught strategic management and design thinking at the Harvard Extension School and received the Joanne Fussa Distinguished Teaching Award in 2014.
- He tweets regularly at @PerkinsCEO.

## Q&A: Dave Power on Leadership

The following is a conversation with Dave Power on life, leadership, and running a nonprofit.

**You've had a distinguished career in technology, finance, consulting, and more, yet being president and CEO of Perkins is the "most important role" of your career. How so?**

**Power:** Blindness, deaf-blindness, and multi-handicapped issues have been around forever. They are stubborn problems, along with the very high unemployment rate for these individuals as adults. If you can make a dent in terms of better ways to prepare students for a more productive and fully engaged life, that has enormous tangible value. It's hard to compare that with the kind of results you get in the private sector.

**Despite your many experiences did you see this position as daunting at first?**

**Power:** I wouldn't say daunting. I think I have enough preparation on what Perkins is about. Certainly you see the world from different perspective when you're in the driver's seat. Perkins is a large, complex organization . . . there are many moving parts. It's not the leaders job to manage all those moving parts, but mostly to make sure things are aligned, people are working on the right things, the organization has the right priorities, the culture and the organization are working well, and then occasionally swooping in to do some firefighting or problem-solving, or to jump on a new opportunity for the organization.

All of that for me has been very manageable because of my background at Perkins, and my own professional

experiences before I got here that gave me a, say, toolkit to take on the challenges as well as the opportunities.

**Has it required a shift in mindset to run a nonprofit organization like Perkins?**

**Power:** Yes. To be the CEO of an organization would be natural transition or career path for me, but to run a nonprofit, that's what was different. If you presented [leadership roles at] a number of nonprofit organizations to me, I might not have jumped on any them. It was Perkins that I knew so well—what the opportunities are, what the challenges are . . . I was sure that if I stepped in that I could make a positive impact.

**You are no stranger to nonprofits, but did you have any preconceptions or biases about running one?**

**Power:** The biggest fear that I had about a nonprofit was, can the organization move quickly enough and can you have the kind of goal-setting and accountability that I was used to in the private sector? In a private company, things tend to align around financial objectives. You pick a goal, and your investments are measured around that financial goal, and the things that are measured toward that financial goal are usually revenue and profits.

In a nonprofit organization everyone is mission-driven, so the metrics for how you're doing in achieving that mission are not as easy to craft. They're not as easy for people to come to similar views on whether the organization is "on mission" or not. How many lives have we improved? In what way? You try to look at what you're trying to achieve and whether you have really made progress.

**Perkins is strongly aligned around mission and financial goals. Do you feel that's the exception rather than the norm in the sector?**

**Power:** The exception? Yes. I think Perkins is one of the better managed nonprofits. It's financially strong. Its board is quite strong and very balanced in skills and with members who are quite active. Many organizations I've seen are, frankly, financially marginal. They are living on the edge and don't have capital to invest. They may not have committed board members who really understand the organization. It makes it much tougher for the leaders of those nonprofits to get as much done.

And I knew all about Perkins before I took the job! I was one of the very active trustees, on several committees, chairing one, very vocal about the topics we discussed, so I knew we were a very results-oriented organization that really engaged in the issues and had a lot of committed people involved.

**Having been a long-time trustee, do you view the board, its role, and its potential any differently now?**

**Power:** I've always thought it was a pretty good board. I'm hoping (laughs) I can get more out of them if I'm creative. I think very much about how to keep them informed about things they need to know, how to get them involved in committee work that's a good match for them. I'm not sure if I can make the board more effective. What I can do is make the *processes* more effective—to make meetings more productive by spending more time on key issues.

I've been on about 10 boards in my career, and my view is the less time you can spend on the "compulsories" (such as financial statements, basic updates) and more time on key issues really soliciting the advice of these talented people while you have them in the room, the better your board meeting will be. I learned that the hard way as a first-time CEO—we didn't spend enough time engaging our board members in an interactive discussion of the key issues before they dispersed to go back to daytime jobs.

#### **How do you view marketing in terms of building a brand in the nonprofit sector?**

**Power:** Marketing is a business label that private companies are more familiar with. Marketing done well is communicating effectively to a target audience that you have a solution to a problem they have. Some view marketing as a very commercial activity and wonder if it has a role in nonprofit organizations . . . but I view marketing as being really clear about your message to your various constituencies, and then everybody wins. We try to be clear to parents, students, school districts and donors about what we do here. When the right students enroll to become students at Perkins, then it's a good match; the same is true when we get the right donors nationally and internationally to make contributions to the causes they care about and they see the results. If you do something valuable that you're proud of and don't let people know, you miss an opportunity. You have an obligation to let people know what you're doing and to have them come on board!

#### **Are the corporate and nonprofit sectors moving closer together, and what are the implications for leadership?**

**Power:** They're doing different things as they always have. One is mission-driven without a pure financial objective. The other has financial objectives and aims for wealth creation. Where the blurring or cross-fertilization is going on is that more talented leaders are choosing to get involved in mission-driven organizations. You're seeing millennials, the new generation of the workforce, consciously choosing to take jobs where they can "make an impact." This is different from the Gordon Gekko, BMW generation of the eighties and nineties. Even private companies when they're hiring talented people are crafting messages about how their company is giving back to society.

Leaders are increasingly looking to nonprofits as places to make a difference. The more results-oriented not-for-profit organizations become, the more they will attract leaders who want to get things done. A lot of leaders have chosen not to spend their personal time in nonprofits because they don't feel like they can do enough as leaders. If they knew that you can make the kind of impact in nonprofits that make private sectors companies want to recruit you—there's a switch—then maybe they would see the opportunity in a new light. We might then see more talented executives building their resumes as leaders of mission-driven organization.

## **About Witt/Kieffer**

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