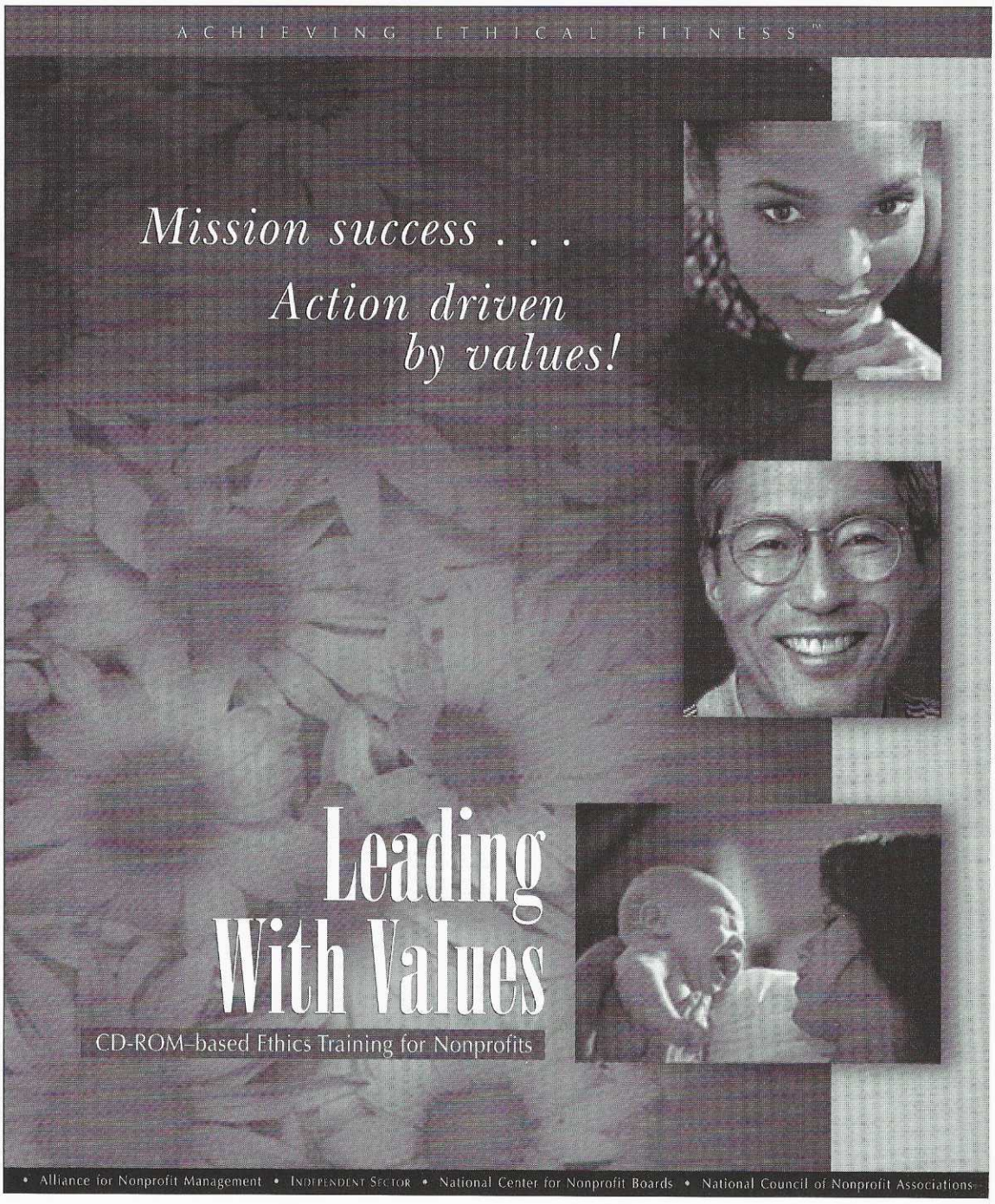
Readings for

Leading With Values



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Resources

Leading with Values

By Rushworth M. Kidder

As we move into the 21st century, the ethical issues facing the world become increasingly complex, intense, widespread, and dangerous. The nonprofit sector is not immune from these societal changes. Board and staff members in these organizations are increasingly pressured by ethical issues. That's not surprising. One of the defining characteristics that separates nonprofit from for-profit organizations—at least in the public mind—is the focus on core values. Nonprofits are often held to higher standards of conduct than for-profits. Why? Because their mission is seen to create and sustain the moral and ethical standards of our culture—to build a better world, and to build it in better ways.

Wherever values are in focus, ethical concerns play a more prominent role. Such issues arise in two ways:

- When individuals depart from their core values and do something unethical, ethics is seen to be a question of right versus wrong.

- When core values come into conflict and produce tough choices between two right courses of action, ethics becomes a matter of right versus right.

These two models play themselves out in two ways familiar to nearly every nonprofit staff and board member.

- First, because nonprofits have a responsibility to do things right, they must constantly be vigilant in right-versus-wrong situations, making sure they are always acting on the side of right.

- Second, because nonprofits have an obligation to do the right things—often making wrenching choices among competing priorities, and having to ask what choice best fits their mission—they must develop methodologies for analyzing and resolving right-versus-right dilemmas.

An exploration of this second obligation—and the need for clear, robust decision making that surrounds it—lies at the heart of the ethics training module we present here. These decisions occur in three areas, from the broadest to the most specialized:

- Because nonprofits are human organizations, they face all the usual ethical issues that arise in business or government—questions of hiring, promotion, layoffs, harassment, gender equity, regulatory reporting, marketing practices, work-life relationships, community citizenship, software copyrights, use of the organization's resources by employees for private gain, and scores of others.

- In addition, nonprofits face a host of issues that are especially acute in their sector, including conflict of interest, the need for transparent reporting, fulfilling donor intent, providing services fairly, competing with for-profit entities, and others.

- Finally, many specialized nonprofits face ethical issues created by circumstances peculiar to their field, including pursuing genetic research (for universities and scientific organizations), acquiring culturally sensitive objects (for museums), addressing domestic violence (for human service organizations), delivering health care fairly (for hospitals), and many more.

This training module is a compilation of readings, checklists, assessment tools, and sample codes of ethics designed to serve as a guide for those in the nonprofit sector.