

The case for the interim executive director

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Too often, there is panic when an organization experiences an executive vacancy.

Given that most nonprofits are strapped for resources, board members face the real possibility they might have to step in and do that work because there is no surplus internal staff capacity.

Boards, then, often feel forced to consider short-term questions. How quickly can we fill this position? Who do we already know in this field? Can we quickly post the current job description? Can we fill it internally with someone who already knows everything?

But the exit of a senior staffer should be a strategic choice point - an opportunity to look forward to future needs without having to consider the presence, capacity and limitations of the departing executive.

This is the prime time to assess an organization's business model and staffing to determine what is needed to advance the organization's mission.

For some nonprofits, a professional interim executive can play the key role in that succession planning by providing the opportunity to disconnect from the previous executive.

The Presbyterian Church, for example, has long insisted that a retiring senior pastor be followed by an interim preacher, from outside, to break the congregation's ties to the former pastor.

This exercise serves to open up the church to what comes next.

A nonprofit with a skilled interim executive in place can disconnect in a similar fashion from its former leader and thoughtfully assess next steps, all while the daily operation of the organization forges ahead.

Moving too quickly to fill a vacancy can result in the candidate who most resembles the departing executive or who is his or her polar opposite.

Such a selection often is a reaction to previous skills and personality rather than an objective assessment of what's most needed.

Sometime boards select a prominent retired business leader as the interim, then congratulate themselves on a distinguished placement.

But without prior nonprofit experience, even an experienced corporate executive can have difficulty adjusting to work life without personal staff, which can mean doing their own filing and powerpoint presentations, ordering their own supplies, making high-level presentations and then stopping at the grocery store to pick up napkins for a fundraising reception.

It is equally important to consider the impact of asking an internal staff member to serve as the interim.

That person likely is already over-burdened, and being asked to assume additional work might not be welcome, even if these are higher level responsibilities.

And an internal staff interim can potentially create negative impact after the successor executive is hired.

Is he or she a candidate for the position? Will she be paid more? When the interim period is over, will she be "demoted" back to her former position? Why is it she could be capable of assuming interim executive duties but not qualified for the permanent position?

Contracting with a professionally trained and experienced interim executive can be smart succession planning.

An experienced interim can keep the staff engaged, donors interested and the board appropriately involved during the search for a permanent hire.

Ultimately, an interim executive can provide the board of directors with the opportunity to determine how best to move into a successful future.

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