



Don't Be Caught with an Empty Bench

Use this model to plan for a successor.

By Joseph C. Santora

Executive turnover has sent shivers up the spines of many boards. Yet most boards haven't prepared to deal with this frequent and often traumatic event.

It Could Happen to You

The alarmingly high turnover rate of nonprofit executives isn't surprising. Today's executive directors must fulfill many leadership and management roles. Their jobs are virtually impossible for anyone except uber-leaders to handle effectively. It's not uncommon for them to "burn out," retire suddenly, find new opportunities, become incapacitated, or die on the job.

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The executive's departure can create major problems. Neither boards nor executives can afford to take a wait-and-see attitude. Instead, they must actively plan for succession.

Use the AIDE Model

The acronym AIDE stands for a four-step succession plan. Both the board and executive director have vital roles to play in this process. The board must ensure effective organizational performance, while the executive director needs to protect a legacy that will continue to benefit constituents. The board

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and executive should work cooperatively to fulfill these four steps:

Step 1. Assess the situation. Decide what skills are most needed in a new executive. Focus on abilities that will help you execute your strategic agenda. Don't look for a superman-type; that person doesn't exist. Instead, pick three or four competencies—such as fiscal planning, fundraising, and human-relations—that are most vital to achieving your organization's goals.

You may need to hold several meetings to reach an agreement, and it may even be necessary to bring in a facilitator. Don't slight this all-important step, as it's the foundation for all the rest.

Step 2. Identify potential new leaders. There may be several employees in the organization who have the skills you've selected. The best approach is to keep your eyes on a number of candidates. Give them leadership challenges to determine their effectiveness.

Also seek out external candidates who possess the necessary skills and who can transition into the organization with the least bit of disruption. This latter point is important, since even if candidates have the right skills, they may create a less than seamless transition into the top position.

Step 3. Develop candidates through a leadership program. Give

them a chance to participate in leadership development seminars, post-graduate courses, and training programs. Rotate internal candidates through different jobs to provide experience in various functional areas and a holistic understanding of how the organization operates.

During this step, candidates can see if they're ready to accept the challenges of the position. At the same time, the board and incumbent executive can decide whom they will groom as the successor.

Step 4. Execute the plan as soon as the incumbent executive leaves. Having a succession plan will reduce disruption and keep morale high during this stressful time. The more planning you've done, the more seamless the transition will be. ■

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RESOURCES

Jenson, Donna, "In Search of the Balanced Leader," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 6.

Peck, David, "Choosing a CEO: The Board's Six Biggest Mistakes," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 2.

Santora, Joseph C., "Planning for Leadership Succession: Are You Ready?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.