

Hiring an Interim Executive Director

When there's turnover at the top, how can you ensure a seamless transition?

By Joseph C. Santora, James C. Sarros, & Mark Esposito



One of today's most pressing challenges is finding a replacement when an executive director departs. Recent surveys agreed that within the next five years nonprofits will experience the loss of many executive directors. Most nonprofits don't have a succession plan and are ill-equipped to deal with the difficult process of replacing their leaders. One solution is to appoint an interim executive director to help weather the period of replacing the organization's leader.

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Where Can You Find an Interim Director?

Candidates for the interim positions include:

- recently retired nonprofit executive directors
- executive directors who have lost their jobs as a result of organizations closing or merging
- employees within your organization who possess leadership skills and have some executive experience
- seconds-in-command in other nonprofit organizations.

When the interim executive isn't an appropriate fit, the outcome can be disastrous.

What Are the Advantages?

- Interim executives often receive a per diem consulting fee as independent consultants. You save money since you don't pay fringe benefits.
- Hiring an interim executive buys the board time to recruit the right person for the job.
- Internal interims (hired from within the organization) know the job and stakeholders. They possess a wealth of knowledge and can advance the organization's interests, especially if they unite top management and staff. External interims bring new skill sets and new networks.

What Are the Pitfalls?

- Not all internal interim appointments want the job. This may cause problems for both the internal appointment and the permanent appointee.
- Interim leaders may not be proactive, especially if they play the role of caretaker waiting to be replaced.
- When the interim executive isn't an appropriate fit, the outcome can be disastrous.

The Lesson

Our experience with interim leaders suggests that the disadvantages tend to outweigh the advantages. If at all possible, you're better off having a succession plan in place so that you don't need to hire an interim director. A good succession plan is the best way to ensure smooth executive transitions.

For information on creating the best succession plan for your organization, see these articles at www.snpo.org/members: "Planning for Leadership Succession" (Vol. 22, No. 4), "Don't Overlook Your Best Successor" (Vol. 25, No. 2), "Seconds-in-Command as Logical Heir Apparents" (Vol. 23, No. 2), and "Planning to Succeed: Creating a Succession Plan" (Vol. 29, No. 3). ■

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